

Communication and Cultural Studies

**Beyond the Ebook: Digital Ecologies and the Future of the Author-
Publisher Relationship, and Bibliotek: A Novel**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

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Abstract

This creative doctorate explores the book publishing industry as it transitions toward digital distribution. There is great anxiety in both popular media and the industry over this shift, with “the book is dead” becoming a perennial headline.

The intent of the two components: exegesis and novel, is to develop critical and business terminology, not only for digital distribution of the ebook form, but also for a new way to look at the book publishing industry. Can authors and publishers make better use of their existent skills in the new ebook form; can readerly functions around online texts be leveraged positively? Via the new opportunities of digital distribution—such as seed and Branch texts—the thesis argues that the ebook can be developed, not to replace existing forms or publishing activities, but instead to form a complimentary media system.

The critical exegesis initially draws upon examples from the film and music industries, as they have moved to digital distribution; what they have learnt which can now be used to aid book publishing? In exploring this, media experiments such as the “Expanded Book” CDROM, and current “Enhanced Book” apps are examined along with unauthorised copying / piracy and legal responses to the myriad new distribution channels. Then the exegesis then looks to how a transformative, sharing readership, once considered a threat to the publishing business could instead help to revitalise it. Instead, can active readers aid the industry via increased attention to texts growing from more permissive copyright law?

The novel, *Bibliotek*, is set in a near future where print bounds are a dangerously addictive substance, and the Houses rule the online Metatext with digital books. When author Graham's latest book is hacked, he must descend into the print underground in order to get a true copy of it back.

A Science Fiction / Cyberpunk pastiche, the novel uses generic conventions to question received understandings of how the book as a technology works.

The fiction extrapolates from current practices in order to develop, not so much a view into the future, but rather a critique of the many directions in which book publishing is acting now.

Dedication

For the librarians of the world—how little people understand what you do.

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**Beyond the Ebook: Digital Ecologies and the Future of the
Author-Publisher Relationship**

Introduction: Book Publishers and Value

Book publishing has been in transition toward digital distribution for decades. “The book is dead” has become a perennial headline, reflecting the anxiety these changes from print to digital have caused. There have been many publishing industry responses to these new digital opportunities—such as hypertext genre writing and other multimedia expanded books. However, these new approaches alter the book as media, and it is important to consider how the author-publisher relationship is affected by these new textual responses and modes of access.

The balance of power between publishers, authors and their audiences has shifted with easier self-publishing and direct-to-consumer distribution channels. With these new text and access options, the traditional “book publisher as gatekeeper” model has become disrupted. The textual ecology—the interrelationship of all published texts—has also been changed with fan writers now able to publish in-line with professional authors.

With changes like this, the economics of the industry has also been altered. My exegesis seeks to examine how these changes may play out, particularly in how the industry can leverage these opportunities for growth. I draw upon evidence from book publishing as it is currently, with pertinent examples from other content industries. The intent of the study is to develop new concepts and clearer language to discuss these changes, in order to help develop new best practice models for the book publishing industry.

When I started this research in 2010 there was considerably greater uncertainty in the publishing industry regarding digital distribution than there is currently (to the end of this study, December 2012, albeit this is an evolving field). Previously, concerns were related to selling digital content, but there is now considerable evidence that consumers will buy electronic books (Malik, 2012; Boog, 2012a), that there is also a market for them beyond Amazon’s Kindle. Given the sales evidence, the focus of my research quickly changed from dealing with uncertainty—and my own fears, as a creative practitioner—toward how authors and publishers could best work together to take advantage of new digital markets. While my focus has settled mainly on fiction

publication, many of the concepts explored in the exegesis are pertinent to other publishing areas.

The publishing industry is now struggling through a tumult of cost-cutting and business mergers (Moulds, 2012). Many of these moves are designed to offset the economic risk of publishing material on to the author (Nawotka, 2009), or to encourage them to self-publish (Cader, 2013). As a creative practitioner myself, I am concerned with the disassociation of publishers from authors, with the attendant economic pressures which may then be put on creators. Further, without the value authors bring to publishing—such as content and audience engagement—the industry itself may be weakened, with consequences to a broader textual ecology. Thus, I seek to explore how publishers and authors can utilise the new digital environment to better take advantage of existent authorial and publisher skills, to engage with newly participative audiences and build the industry together.

My research is both critical and creative. *Bibliotek* is a science fictional extrapolation of the critical issues facing the current industry. The novel is a fictional look at the future of authorship, where book texts are wholly free on the “Metatext” (the Internet), and authors work with publishing houses to shepherd readers around the text. The crux of this model is that readers do not pay for access to the text; instead they pay to have ownership of their own reader identities. They are also free to write derivative texts, to be acknowledged as contributors in-line with the original, but they must purchase that privilege. The personal concerns I have as a new career practitioner led to the imagining of the novel; the questions that rose therein necessitated my researching emergent best practice for book publishing.

My thesis began with the question: what is the future of the author-publisher relationship in an era of digital ecologies? In answering this, I have looked to outline an understanding of the new modes of distribution as they impact the book publishing industry, its members and to develop a model for a digital, *textual* media that takes full advantage of those changes. An important part of this process involved developing an understanding of how authors and audiences interact to build broader textual ecologies, via more permissive technological and legal practices.

Below, I outline my definition of the "ebook" as a textual, communicative media. Whilst my definition situates the ebook as distinct from both hypermedia and computer games, it of necessity draws upon research material from those fields, as well as literary studies. The intent of this definition is to locate my exegesis and research as exploring a media that takes the best of the traditional print book, and furthers it toward a robust digital form.

Further to this aim, I explore the author-publisher relationship, amongst more social, reader-centric texts. This introduction outlines the relevant theoretical background, whilst placing it in the ebook context.

The Author-Publisher Relationship

There are many new opportunities for self-publishing online (Apple's "iBooks Author," Smashwords' "Meatgrinder"), as well as increasing numbers of partnerships between self-publishers and traditional publishers, such as Penguin Group's purchase of the self-publishing company Author Solutions (Sonnet and Trachtenberg, 2012). Practically speaking, this means authors no longer necessarily require publishers, and the role of the publisher is in flux. This is precisely the issue that drives my critical exegesis: the separation of author from publisher.

Author Solutions (<http://www.authorsolutions.com/>) is a case in point: it is a service that helps self-publishing authors package their texts for distribution. While primarily print-centric, Mark Coker from Smashwords anticipates there will soon be more money being made in paid author services than there is in publishing books themselves (2012). It may not necessarily be as literal as traditional publishers moving wholesale into self-publishing and author services, but the business relationship between author and publisher is changing from historically close working conditions toward an author-pays service engagement.

The problem with this development is that each party has traditionally brought their own important skills and values to the industry. Publishers have brought curation, editorial, design, distribution and marketing into the equation—which, not surprisingly (excluding curation) are the very services Author Solutions and the like now offer authors at a price. Traditionally, the publisher has absorbed the commercial risk of this

price (against only the *potential* of future royalties), with the larger publishers better able to offset those costs in-house. This is a significant role that publishers have played, given that profitability is never certain—the risk taken on one book can be balanced-out, over the whole organisation, by the success of another; a state of affairs an individual, independent author is unlikely to be able to replicate. Now that the scale of profits to be made is in doubt with the increasing fragmentation of the market (Wiesmann & Budden, 2012) it is not surprising to see those costs being offloaded on authors. Unfortunately, authors are considerably less likely than publishers to be able to absorb attendant costs and losses.

Even given the savings publishers can make by growing their distance from authors, such a split begins to damage the overall publisher brand. The relationship is damaged because the function of creating identification between the reader and publisher, as a trusted partner, is diluted by not being central to the reading experience itself (Bell, 1998). Publishers may no longer be seen as the go-between who introduces a reader to a new book or author. While this trusted recommendations role was once predominantly performed by “gatekeeper” publishers responsible for choosing what was made public, the rapid increase in published content—including self-published material—now makes this role much more difficult. With less of a relationship between different, self-published texts, one work enjoyed does not necessarily point a reader toward any other text. While this is not an absolute shift—many readers have traditionally followed authors or third party reviews—it is disintermediation. Now, texts can help to build value and attention around the author as an individual, rather than being linked to a publisher and their broader complement of texts (Ruberti & Simeone, 2011).

By disassociating from the author, publishers are giving away a significant avenue through which they could reach audiences with their own brand. Of course there are publishers—such as Angry Robot Books—who do work directly with authors, but the trajectory of offsetting the responsibility of production and publicity to the author works to create a fragile personal / authorial, rather than commercial, brand.

While digital distribution and the rise of self-publishing would seem to indicate a future where publishers are irrelevant, or not needed (at least not by all authors), I argue

that author-publisher relationship should remain, but needs to be re-thought. The question is, how can authors and publishers work together to strengthen *distribution channels*? It is my belief that they can work with a supportive network of readers in order to allow each book to both benefit from, and further inform, the broader publishing industry.

Terminology and Definitions

“Ebook,” “digital distribution” and “textual ecology” are all central terms to my discussion. My particular usage of these concepts both limits and informs my research, providing scope and grounding for the exploration of the industry. Given the divergent meanings other scholars and the book publishing industry itself often use, the following will define the concepts that are encompassed by this critical exegesis.

I prefer “ebook,” over “eBook” and “e-book” for both simplicity and the electronic component’s relationship to the primary “book.” To separate “electronic” from “book” suggests that it is merely a version of the “primal” print book. In textual terms as well as business, I believe this harkening to the print book as authoritative is problematic for building a sustainable ebook media.

To explore another relationship between electronic and print, I must outline my definition of the “book” as a category. Even a “simple” definition such as that provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates difficulties when re/thinking the book in electronic terms, saying that a book is:

A written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers ... [and] a literary composition that is published or intended for publication as a book (2012).

The physical definition conflates the book object with the content. John Perry Barlow further problematizes the issue in his foreword to Doctorow’s *Content* (2008), pointing out that this confluence works to tie the abstract “book” to its physical form. The idea of tying object and concept together lies at the heart of many issues around ebooks and digital distribution. It is not only an issue at the commercial end—as Greenfield notes, consumers often overestimate the costs of the object itself versus the text (2012)—but also at the industrial end, where the confusion leads to a fragmentation of book publishing formats within the business. The industry can thus misunderstand the

opportunities for book text, by interpreting it as only print, and so positioning the “ebook” as more of a multimedia form, along with the business complexities that such an interpretation implies (see the “Expanded Book” by Voyager Company, Virshup, 1996). To clarify, while there is an expanding market of print-to-electronic “facsimiles”—which coattail on print agreements, the “ebook” as an experimental form tends to be a multimedia collage.

To this end, I wish to separate the *object* of the “pbook” (print book) and the format of the “ebook,” from the text itself, creating space for textual ebooks to be developed as a new media category within themselves. While this demotes the pbook to the same level as the ebook, it also highlights the textual similarities between the two, rather than the formal differences. It further concentrates on authorship and writing, and allows enhanced and multimedia narratives to be constructed as different media, not only in terms of experiential use, but also legally. The “book,” regardless of format, may traditionally be understood by laws for copyright and authorship, instead of being viewed through the issues of patent and platform under which many enhanced works, with their cooperative natures, suffer.

I must note, that whilst I am writing from an Australian context, my discussion of copyright is primarily drawing from American law (*Copyright Act 1976*). I have chosen to focus on US copyright, because the main players in the ebook field (ie, Apple and Amazon) are situated in the United States. In addition, due to a current free-trade agreement (*Australia – United States Free Trade Agreement 2005*), Australian law has begun to lean toward matching American law.

While those copyright issues may not be especially awkward for larger media corporations, the current situation of separating the e- and pbook does bring complexity into the book publishing equation and further disrupts the relationship between publisher and author.

Decoupling the abstract notion of the content from the book form does bring with it other problems, however. The historical evolution of book text is tightly related to its physical form; with the basic length constraints and chapter / folio formatting being informed by its physical nature. As such, the mutable ebook is often understood as a threat to the book as an art form. It need not be an issue, however, if the definition of the

“book” is reconfigured to focus on its textual nature, rather than the historical object. In this exegesis, I chose to define the book as a “developed textual narrative.” “Textual,” of course, focuses on the specific medium of *text*, not other hybridised media.

Length is not further defined, as the new movement for short book texts like Byliner (www.byliner.com) shows great promise for distribution. Rather, the definition requires that a book be a developed narrative, not merely a collection of disparate texts. This concept of narrative retains the core of what makes a book—instead of a collection of texts, which actually suggests the physical object as a container for different texts—it allows the *argument* and *story* to take precedence.

The definition proposed includes a number of texts that would otherwise not be considered a “book”—such as long-form journalism, and arguably “nano” stories such as SMS publications—and rejects others. A “children’s picture book” is excised from my use of the term, along with new forms like the “enhanced book.” I do not consider this an issue, however, as these, like the “comic book,” are hybrid media forms which advance their narrative through methods other than the primarily text-based “book.” They are better having their own critical idioms—the hybrid and visual, with the physical nature of the works also being paramount (Chiong, Ree & Takeuchi, 2012).

In terms of my exegesis, concentrating on the book text itself allows me to discuss the differences between the pbook and ebook forms (along with any future developments of format), not as distinct editions but as versions of the same. While there are distinct differences to the experiential nature of formats, the core *text* can be dealt with in the same critical manner. While that seems particularly academic in nature, it is significant in an industry sense given one book text can be formatted in many ways, and the current (ill-defined) distinction between electronic and print versions complicates issues of ownership and distribution.

I do not wish to downplay the importance of other forms; indeed, much of this exegesis looks at the interaction of many media forms around the book text. It is also quite foolish to attempt to detangle the broader textual ecologies of diverse media from any one creative industry, particularly in an environment of horizontal digital distribution. However, there also needs to be a practical business definition for the book text in order to make use of existing critical and legal terminology, to move forward with

more encompassing language.

Literature Review

Existing literature commonly refers to two related concepts: “digital distribution” and the “digital / textual ecology.” Digital distribution is online content distribution, using neither analogue nor digitally encoded *objects* (such as a digitally encoded CD), only downloadable content (Benjamin & Wigand, 1995). It includes website downloads and digital storefronts like Amazon and iTunes, as well as streaming services and peer-to-peer services (authorised and unauthorised).

It is important to note here the usage of “unauthorised” rather than “illegal,” given the fraught nature of the law around copyright and licensing. The case of authorised versus unauthorised can instead be considered an access issue, rather than a punitive legal one (at least before particular cases are tried in court).

“Digital ecology” highlights the digital distribution form, as this relates to the online producer and consumer interactions around downloadable content. The digital ecology is a way of viewing the sharing and interrelationship of texts and their usage, focusing both on the way people interact with the text, and with each other through connected media. Boyle (cited by Cramer, 2001) coined the term “digital ecology” to discuss copyright law in media, in order to better conceptualise the way that intellectual “property” is actually used. Hayles (2002) takes this further, discussing the “textual ecology” as a system of texts interdependent with each other and their readers. I use these ideas to explore not only a digital media, but also one that takes advantage of its very connectivity.

Anderson’s (2004; 2006) “long tail” concept of selling many out-of-print and marginal products, at small prices to build a hugely profitable business works well with the idea of both digital distribution and textual ecologies. The concept of selling small numbers of many interrelated books could help the publishing industry utilise mid- and backlist authors and audiences in ways never before possible—given that ideally, the industry works with authors to strengthen textual ecology relationships.

Ebooks cannot only link many different readers together, but also many other texts together in the textual ecology. These linked textual components are a further,

technologically-aided take on what Genette labels the paratext (1987/1997), which may also include works such as fan texts written about/around the original itself. Examples of paratexts are texts ancillary to the core text, such as the blurb of a monograph or bibliographic details of the author. They may stretch to annotation and critique of the text, and discussion of the original. Another concept key to the textual economy is the metatext, which is not a critique of the original, but a subsidiary part *of* it. Fan fiction functions as this kind a metatext to the original, enlarging the readable text itself instead of being a paratext around it. While Gray (2010) talks about this fan fiction “metatext” as a part of his whole conceptualisation of paratext, I choose to break them into two parts, in order to recognise producer-led paratexts, and *audience*-led metatexts. While both para- and metatexts have always paralleled literature, the hypertextualised archive of the Internet allows them to be read in an immediate, non-linear form (Dalgaard, 2004).

Together, these para- and metatexts push readers into a writerly literature (Barthes, 1972), where they are not merely receptive of content, but also communicative of it. The positioning of the reader into an active and published writerly stance could become a driving force toward what makes ebooks unique as a media. A model of including such an active readership could then be utilised as a tool to add value to an ebook, perhaps becoming a viable economic, subscription model for ebook publishing.

Electronic Literature and Hypertext Writing

While there has been some critical work that explores the ebook, it tends to focus on new electronic literatures, or a specific, current sales model rather than the broader transition of the “book” to digital distribution. While these areas do not entirely cover issues pertaining to the author-publisher relationship, a number of studies have been helpful in locating the bounds of my subject.

Hayles’ *Electronic Literature* (2008) discusses new media experiments with text. Drawing on the history of the ebook, this strand of study focuses on two avenues: enhanced books like multimedia texts, along with digital distribution methods like the CDROM, and more recently Amazon.com; or on hypertext and

hypermedia writing, like Landow's *Hyper/Text/Theory* (1994). While these ideas, and the work on hypertext narratives, look to expand the concept of writing the "book" out into a richer media environment, two problems they do not attend to are: the economics of publishing enhanced books, and tangential to this, why readers who are expecting a book will choose to buy these texts rather than pirate them—there is simply no value added to the paid version, they are, in these terms, the *same* book. These issues of business and audience engagement are explored further in my exegesis.

I have chosen not to focus on hypermedia narratives in the belief that while hypermedia fiction and non-fiction works are a significant new genre to study, it is a rather narrow field that does not reflect the more general commercial publishing which is my focus. Rather, I am more interested in exploring the hypertextual and social nature of the ebook form, which presents a highly mutable and communicative textual work that can be broadly applicable to many textual types. It is also important to note the work done by ludologists and game studies scholars (Aarseth, 1997; Galloway, 2006), as another way to look at how audiences may interact with a text that provides choices in progressing through the narrative. However, computer games also present a distinct genre of their own, which is not applicable to the ebook form.

Business and the Other Media Industries

Other studies look at the business and audience view of digital publishing. Clifford Lynch's *Battle to Define the Future of the Book in the Digital World* (2001) provides an excellent overview of the ebook's history. Cope and Phillips' *The Future of the Book in the Digital Age* (2006) gives further, specifically Australian, material on the shift toward digital distribution.

Goldhaber (1997) provides a new way to view digital economics, with the concept of the attention economy, making the business of digital publishing very much about the audience themselves. The work by Jenkins (1992) and Hellekson (2009) further forms a strong basis for developing views regarding fan works. Exploring this, Lessig's *Creative Commons* (2004) and Doctorow's *Giving it Away*

(2006), with his practical examples of copyleft (n.d.a; n.d.b), display the power of attention. Using these concepts allows for a more nuanced view of the relationship between professional and amateur publication. This approach makes it possible to frame the relationships between authors and publishers in a less fraught way, as each vies for authority via economic and legal constraints.

There is not a great deal of academic material published regarding the current shift from print to digital distribution of book text, however, and so much of the research in this exegesis draws examples instead from film and music. Knopper's *Appetite for Self Destruction* (2009) and Kot's *Ripped* (2009) for example, give a prescient outline for where the publishing industry may be headed. Similarly, distribution and ownership concerns in film (Smith and Telang, 2011) offer illustrative concerns for book publishing.

I bring these ideas together to illustrate the book publishing industry as it enters digital distribution. The exegesis situates the ebook form as an entirely new publishing avenue, but uses examples from other media to offer a critical examination of past shifts that might inform the future of ebook publishing.

Chapter Breakdown

My critical exegesis contains two sections. The first relates to the publishing industry and the book form. It is an overview of the industry, intended to examine it in relation to other content industries (music and film), looking at the experiments of book form being drawn from those interactions. This then forms the grounding for section two, which considers authorship and audience.

Chapter one focuses on industry and distribution, exploring new media forms and the business models supporting them. While the issue of distribution is only just beginning to affect print and the publishing industry, there have been numerous examples of responses to its disruption in other content production sectors, such as the industry-led legal responses by music producers and their related recording industry associations, targeting digital "piracy." There are also technological mechanisms used to control the ways which consumers can make use of content (such as digital rights management (DRM) and the use of proprietary file formats). However, these responses

set up an antagonistic relationship between content creators and consumers. I argue that an unregulated content market might actually better suit both publishers and authors.

Chapter two focuses on the changing book, looking at new business models such as streaming and in-text advertising—which draw upon experiments from other media industries. These examples also highlight the changeable nature of the book text, and how multimedia texts tend not to take advantage of the textual skills of the publishing industry. This chapter then explores the unique values of the publishing industry along with author expertise.

Section two focuses on authorship and audience, exploring the evolution of the relationship between author and reader. Digital distribution blurs the distinction between “published” text and subsidiary text, and is thus often considered a threat to the industry; I argue that instead, it can present opportunities for growth.

Chapter three focuses on authorship, dealing with fan engagement via what I term “seed” and “branch” texts—very simply, “original” and “derivative” texts, but governed by a more fluid, social relationship between authors, “writers” and audiences. The issue explored relates to the conflation of roles in a digital environment where traditionally “published” material is delivered alongside fan “published” work. The chapter suggests a distinction between the legal “author” role, and a new, moral rights interpretation of “writer.”

In chapter four, I explore copyright and alternatives, looking to examples that support whole ecologies of big and small publishers. I explore social reading, not only to suggest a monetisation of the audience, but also to support fluidity between seed and branch texts. The chapter then presents a critique of Creative Commons Non-Commercial, copyleft and other licensing options in order to support social reading. With active audiences, creators may be better able to fill niche interests and thus maximise profit whilst also exploring the potential issues around the intersection of professionally authored and fan written texts.

Section One: Industry and the Book Form

Chapter One: Industry and Distribution

The book publishing industry can learn much from other media sectors in its transition to digital content distribution. In this chapter, I examine the film and music industries, reviewing how their business responses to earlier digital engagements may translate to book publishing. It is important to look at these other industries because we can extrapolate many of the issues the book publishing industry may encounter and then evaluate best practice responses. There are certainly successes in other content industries—as there already are in book publishing—such as online stores for digital material. However, there are also systemic issues at play in even successful approaches that merit further exploration.

I am specifically concerned with how publishers seek to control revenue streams via the control of release mechanisms, using both technical and legal methods to restrict content usage to their producer-intended limitations. There are two main methods of control used by creative industries in digital transition: Digital Rights Management (DRM), and propriety formatting. This chapter examines whether these controls truly help the industry, or whether they actually work to limit ebook uptake.

These two control mechanisms aim to give content producers and distributors direct ownership over their material, and also control over how that material can be used, making consumer access more of a license to use rather than a purchase. While it could be argued these control mechanisms are constructions meant to mediate an ethical content usage, the primary drive for ownership control mechanisms comes from what Lessig terms a “permission culture” (2003). What this entails is that all consumers must explicitly receive permission in order to perform any manipulation, or shift of content from an “authorised” form (as at time of purchase) to any other. Control mechanisms also drive further sales for format shifts—such as access to versions for listening to in the car as well as at home. They also constrain unauthorised sharing activities (“piracy” in industry parlance), which include acts analogous to sharing a pbook from one family member to another. The restrictions go further than even analogue limitations, with

DRM and propriety formatting being a way to extend content owners' rights beyond what even copyright law explicitly (and even implicitly) suggests (Luh, 1999; MacLachlan, 1999; also Litman, 1999). Levy (2000) goes so far as to call copyright a zero-sum proposition:

As consumers' rights expand, copyright owners' rights contract. As a result of this perception, the copyright industries have sought to ensure that copyright protection will not be compromised in the digital age, though digital technologies make infringement easier than it has ever been. They have sought to make the law conform to their ends, and in this respect, they have been quite successful (Levy, 2000, "Law and Legislation Favoring Copyright Owners Rights Expansion," para. 1).

DRM is well covered in critical literature in both positive and negative lights (Burk, 2005; Lohmann, 2002; Lessig, 2003). While direct control mechanisms—requiring technical intervention in order for consumers to view and use content—are considered a failure in most media instances (Hoffmann, 2009; Gates, quoted in Arrington, 2006), we still see these same controls being applied in the book publishing sector. Some publishers are following Apple's iTunes and Amazon in removing DRM (see: "Momentum Drops DRM," 2012; "Tor/Forge E-Books Are Now DRM-Free," 2012), however, despite removing DRM mechanisms, vendor and distributor lock-in, via propriety formatting, continues in the book industry. The distributor specific file formats lead to issues with digital distribution value chains, with ownership versus product licensing that replicates many of the same problems film and music have tried to overcome.

Propriety Formats

The issue of proprietary formatting is a particularly pertinent one for the book publishing industry now, with competing "de facto" standards such as Amazon's Mobi and Kindle formats versus open file types like ePub. This is different from previous instances, in that Amazon—one of the main proponents of propriety formatting—is both technology company *and* distributor. The placement of one business controlling both aspects allows for a lock-in to their format ecosystem whilst also giving the perception of choice by facilitating the play of their chosen format *through* competitor's devices.

The issues raised by conflicts in propriety formats have a long history, going

back to different train track gauges and their compatibility with trains across geographic areas (Puffert, 2002). In film and music, one particularly famous case is Sony's Betamax versus JVC's VHS videotape formats (Liebowitz and Margolis, 1995). Music also has a recent history of issues regarding proprietary formats, and clearly demonstrates the problems with ensuing format or standards wars between technology firms and distributing groups such as Apple and Amazon. These "wars" are always between two or more firms; each with new formats that they hope will become standard across the whole market (Ullmann-Margalit, 1978). A business wins the war by having sold the audience media that is only compatible with their proprietary players, locking them to the company's device ecology. Owning the format also provides profit via licensing the rights of their new standard to once competing firms (or to form a monopolistic industry wholly themselves). Such wars are played out leveraging audience buy-in of one format versus another (Church and Gandal, 2004, p. 13).

An example of this kind of format war is that of the "Secure Digital Music Initiative" (SDMI) format which challenged the open MP3 digital music file format in 1998-99. The SDMI group was to be a voluntary consortium of technology companies and content owners headed by the Recording Industry Association of America (hereafter the RIAA, <http://www.riaa.com/>), which would promote interoperable standards all following the same rules of media security in order to combat unauthorised access. Instead, their group ended up with a number of conflicting formats, with different companies attempting to control the outcome of SDMI to their own individual advantage. Ironically, this ended up with a proliferation of different "SDMI" standards, each compatible with MP3 but not with each other, resulting in consumer confusion regarding SDMI as a whole (Levy, 2000). Whilst this incompatibility was problematic for the broad format uptake, it was not entirely foolish on the participant's parts, nor was it necessarily bad for the industry as a whole:

Economists argue that compatibility in high technology markets is actually socially undesirable for consumers because it leads to inefficient inertia that retards innovation. Once consumers have settled on a standard, and all manufacturers adhere to that standard, other potentially superior innovative technologies may be ignored in favor of maintaining the status quo. Moreover, manufacturers in compatible markets may collude to maintain price and profits, removing the incentive to invest in research and development (Levy, 2000, "Lack of Interoperability," para. 2).

The move could have ultimately worked in the favour of industry development; however, the issue facing the nascent SDMI standard was more a question of its own internal legitimacy. Its group members presented a combined front versus the unsecured MP3 standard (Fitzpatrick, 1999), whilst in reality, they were “promoting a vaporware specification, not intended to be successful, but rather to disrupt consumer adoption of other formats” (Levy, 2000, “SDMI External Obstacles,” para. 2). Thus, the SDMI format can be seen more as an attempt to deflect the open MP3 format, rather than a genuine competing format itself.

Such upheavals in new, incompatible formats may still be worthwhile to content owners if in each change from locked format to locked format, people are led to re-buy the content. There is evidence that the music industry did gain from such a bump during the transition from LPs to CDs after their introduction in 1982, to the extent they almost entirely replaced LPs and tapes in the 1990s. In fact, this may explain the huge increase in music sales over this period—existing music buyers replaced now outmoded and outdated recordings collected over their life, causing a false increase in music sales. Indeed, some critics argue that this bump is now being used by the recording industry to scaremonger about the disastrous effects of music “piracy,” when in reality the drop may just be a correction of inflated CD sales:

A similar pattern may be an ongoing transition of CDs to MP3’s. ... This possible transition, however, does not imply that online music distribution substitutes for existing media such as CDs, hence resulting in a downturn in recording sales. It rather implies that recording sales would have increased if the recording industry had adopted new technology much earlier. In other words, the current slowdown in recording sales may partly reflect this slow adjustment of the recording industry to new technologies (Hong, 2004, p. 23).

Further, consumers may easily mistake a confused market of incompatible formats as an immature market. As such, industries promoting a dominant format, or a number of inter-compatible formats can instead drive consumer confidence in up-taking new media technologies (Besen and Farrell, 1994).

Whilst SDMI had issues in convincing enough of an audience to switch to the new standard—perhaps due to confusion, or a lack of broad content on offer—this was not the biggest failure of the standard. As Levy observed at the time, the impact of SDMI left “ardent MP3 users ... unwilling to switch to a new standard, even if it is

superior, which will jeopardize their connection to other Internet music lovers” (Levy, 2000, “MP3 Locked-In As Preferred Standard,” para. 1). This example suggests that it does not actually matter what the utilities of a format are if another already has a head start in connecting users (Farrell and Salome, 1986). Instead, the consumer-to-consumer relationship highlights just how important social capital issues are in building a format and media (something which I further explore in section two).

It is generally considered that the downfall of the SDMI format was due to the fact that the format did not bring enough value to the format war to be able to overcome the incumbent MP3:

The consumer-electronics industry knows a hard lesson that the RIAA has yet to learn: Regardless of the business model, it has to start with value to the consumer. The majors believed that just providing content is value that should be good enough for anyone (Scheirer, 1999, “Why it Failed,” para. 2).

This is the challenge facing book publishing now, the need to locate the proper value of their industry to their consumers. If the publishing industry follows the trajectory of the music industry, we will see one of two scenarios emerge: an interoperable format allowing for greater values of consumer connections between each other and a myriad of devices, increasing user buy-in; or a multitude of competing formats confusing consumers and diminishing the breadth of the communicable utility of any one format. Locking consumers in to any one technological format or distributor narrows the consumer’s broader buy-in to the whole content industry. Book publishing can get around the issue of industry maturity by more widely considering the ePub format which, as an extension of HTML, is quite adaptable and robust, driven by broad Web development. While Amazon does have a strong dominance with their own MOBI, AZW and KF8 formats, there is also an existing infrastructure for ePub in place as an extension to trusted Web technologies, making it a strong contender for new growth in the industry. Embracing an open and trusted format also allows publishers to play different distributors off against one another, and to develop more proactive pricing schemes.

By chasing control over their own standard the content owners may have been playing into technology company and distributor hands, in the process diminishing the consumer’s engagement with the actual *content* industry.

Value Chains

To an extent, this breaking of consumer engagement has already happened in the book publishing industry with the proliferation of ebook formats. Now *technology companies*, rather than those in content production, are taking the lead in offering easy to use, end-to-end distribution and retail and consumption experiences. Further, the rise of the online distribution services, primarily Amazon and more recently Apple, are changing the overall value chain for many industries.

Looking at the music value chain, traditionally there have been artists working directly with record labels to produce content to be distributed by middlemen groups to record stores and so to the consumer, as Bockstedt, et al. demonstrate:

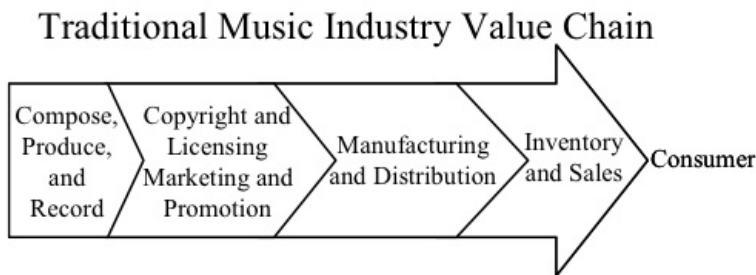


Figure 1.1: Bockstedt, Kauffman and Riggins, 2005, p. 4.

However, with the growing uptake of the Internet for activities such as shopping, there has been a compacting of this supply chain to consumers. Those historically considered “distributors” now become very much a part of the consumer’s direct experience. In addition to this new consumer awareness of trade options, the new distributors (e.g., Apple and Amazon) are also a consolidation of many competing retail outlets, with only these few integrated international distributors acting as direct consumer outlets.

Digital Music Industry Value Chain

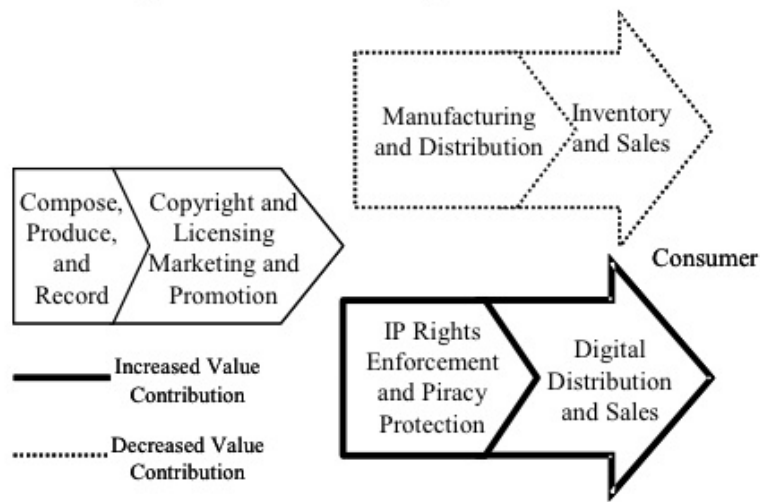


Figure 1.2: Bockstedt, Kauffman and Riggins, 2005, p. 4.

As Bockstedt, et al. explain:

The added value to the music product from manufacturing and distribution [physical product distribution] is decreasing, but digital music retailers add new value. With Internet distribution and music piracy, they can now add value through marketing, promotions, copyrighting and licensing. There is also value added through enforcement of IP rights and piracy prevention. As a result, the channel power dynamics change. ... Digital music retailers are building installed bases of customers. As the number of consumers increases, digital music providers' control over the costs associated with selling music will increase (Bockstedt, et al, 2005, p. 5-7).

This article talks about the new possibilities for artists dealing with their audiences in a much closer way (which has interesting parallels to direct audience engagement, which I will explore in section two). However, as Bockstedt, et al. (2005) point out, the online distributors are being given not only sole distribution powers, but also lock-in power by way of controlling incompatible file formats. This then gives them new and unprecedented influence over both ends of the content industry. Online distributors become the sole channel through which consumers and content owners can communicate, giving the distributor power over what information passes either way (see: "Amazon Pulls Macmillan Books Over E-Book Price Disagreement," Stone, 2010).

As a powerful online distributor, Apple is well known as a disruptive influence in the music industry, not only for the introduction of the iPod, but also because of the emergence of the iTunes model of track by track purchasing versus a traditional whole

album model, and the setting of a price of US99¢ per track:

The 99¢ per song pricing is interesting because providers currently make little or no money on each digital song purchase. ... This lack of profits suggests that the 99¢ price may be set to grow the market and each service provider's share. The sale of 99¢ songs in specific [proprietary] MP3 formats such as Apple's AAC and Microsoft's WMA may be a lock-in strategy to promote sales of complementary products such as expensive MP3 players (Bockstedt, et al 2005, p. 1-2).

Amazon has since been embraced by many in the music industry as a mediating effect on Apple's influence in distribution. This is ironic in terms of the book publishing industry, given that not long after, the publishing companies would then use Apple as a check on Amazon.

Distribution Models

In the digital era, the book publishing industry's value chain has now become very similar to the music industry, particularly in that bricks and mortar shop fronts are shutting down (Spector and Trachtenberg, 2011). Whether this collapse was a direct result of online, direct to consumer distribution is still very much up for debate (Osnos, 2011), and there is still no current research on the ramifications of this question regarding the failure of physical retail. However, with physical stores closing, and the growing uptake of tablet computers and dedicated e-readers (Takahashi, 2011) the contraction of the book publishing supply chain is speeding up.

In book publishing, there are similar issues with incompatible formats as with the music industry, mainly between an open ePub format (as seen in Apple's iBookstore and on the Sony Reader) and Amazon's exclusive MOBI ebook format. This lack of compatibility is currently achieving just what the music industry had hoped to achieve with the SDMI format—consumer lock-in and market dominance. Online distributors are meeting publisher insistence on DRM-controlled ebook files, but this merely props up Amazon's Mobi and the dominance of the Kindle e-reader. As Mathew Ingram puts it:

The tangle of rights and often competing interests of publishers and authors when it comes to licensing copies or sharing, makes e-book buying a snake-pit of complexities — and only reinforces Amazon's hold on the market, since it offers a simple end-to-end solution. ... Instead of making it easy for readers to

download their authors' work on different platforms and share and copy it, [publishers] have only made it easier for Amazon to control them and dominate the industry (Ingram, 2011, para. 7).

Ironically, whereas Amazon's MP3 Store was once brought in to moderate the commercial strength of Apple's iTunes store by the dominant record labels (Stone, 2009a), the opposite has now occurred in the ebook space. The contention may be read in terms of a struggle over two different distribution models: wholesaler or agency. Originally, Amazon had been acting as the main distributor of ebooks, for its Kindle e-reader. Via the Kindle store, Amazon set what publishers viewed as an unreasonable (and arguably unsustainable) price expectation in the minds of readers for ebooks, at the time at Amazon's own expense:

Amazon had been buying many e-books from publishers for about thirteen dollars and selling them for \$9.99, taking a loss on each book in order to gain market share and encourage sales of its electronic reading device, the Kindle. By the end of last year, Amazon accounted for an estimated eighty per cent of all electronic-book sales, and \$9.99 seemed to be established as the price of an e-book (Auletta, 2010, p. 1-2).

This is a general wholesaler model, where the retailer (in this case Amazon) sets the consumer price. The publisher argument against this was that it would set the consumer price below the cost to produce the ebook (see Rich, 2010, for a breakdown of ebook costs versus print). In response, Apple stepped into the fray with its Agency model. With the introduction of the iPad, ebook pricing became a hot topic; it became a way publishers could leverage power over the incumbent. As Apple's Steve Jobs explained in an interview:

"Why," Mossberg asked, should consumers "pay Apple \$14.99 when they can buy the same book from Amazon for \$9.99?" "That won't be the case," Jobs said, seeming implacably confident. "The price will be the same." Mossberg asked him to explain. Why would Amazon increase prices, when consumers were buying so many books? "Publishers may withhold their books from Amazon," Jobs said. "They're unhappy" (Auletta, 2010, p. 2).

What was being proposed was an "Agency" model, where Apple and its iBookstore would only distribute and "facilitate" ebook sales as a sales agent (or platform), and take their 30% cut, whilst the publishers controlled the price as direct to their customers.

The result was that both Apple and Amazon worked under an Agency model for the publishers. However, the transition was not easy, as can be seen with Amazon

responding to a publisher demanding Agency-pricing, by temporarily suspending the publisher's print sales via the Amazon site (Ingram, 2010). The transition to agency had already happened, however, with Apple in partnership with four of the five major publishers. Amazon said, "we will have to capitulate and accept Macmillan's terms because Macmillan has a monopoly over their own titles, and we will want to offer them to you even at prices we believe are needlessly high for e-books" (Amazon.com, Inc., 2010). What this consumer-facing comment shows, however, was that *Amazon* was aware of consumer concerns, not the publishers.

One intriguing outcome of this shift to the Agency model is precisely the sense of blame directed at both publishers and authors, with Kindle user reviews on the Amazon site tagged with "9 99 Boycott" (Amazon.com, Inc., 2011a). Readers who had already become used to the Amazon-subsidised cost of ebooks, reacted to higher Agency prices by voting all such ebooks with one star reviews, noting this was due to pricing, rather than "quality." This is an example of what can happen when the online distributors frame the discussion, controlling the communications between consumers and content owners—they hold consumer trust, not the publishers, who have instead situated themselves as a "service" and not a consumer-facing actor.

The agency model has now attracted price-fixing allegations for Apple and the "big six" publishing conglomerates from the US Department of Justice (Catan and Trachtenberg, 2012). The decision by the District Court of Southern New York (*United States of America v Apple, Inc.*, 2012; and in Europe, European Commission, 2012) switched control back to distributors, allowing for heavy discount pricing by companies like Amazon, as long as the aggregate of any one publisher's sales were not below cost. The decision is now seen as giving distributors *selling power*—market share—over peak periods like Christmas, which they can then make up to publishers over the rest of the year (Shatzkin, 2012). The decision still allows for publishers to set over-all prices, but hands consumer-facing power to large distributors. The real irony is that the publisher's brief power over Amazon only ever actually occurred via the weight of *another* distributor (Apple). Further, in achieving this minor win, the publishers actually had to act against their own reading customers by increasing prices in order to affect their control.

By handing over consumer engagement to a few larger distributors, book publishers (like their music counterparts before them) are giving a huge amount of control over their own business to groups that are more interested in sales than in the “publishing brand.” This can be seen directly in Amazon’s interest in pursuing self-publishing as a way to drive quantity of content, dealing with authors and selling directly to readers. Amazon is both trying to become the central distributor of traditional publishers, and also build their own publishing imprints with both self-published and original content (Amazon.com Inc., 2011b). Amazon no longer positions themselves just as a powerful distributor of decentralised content (for example, self-published material from around the Web), but privilege themselves as a “publisher above publishers” by prioritising their own products. I would argue that this is about positioning themselves as a “reliable” central distributor of content and situating themselves outside the existing book publishing industry than in becoming a traditional publisher themselves. By contracting the value chain Amazon becomes a kind of preferred publisher and that in turn limits the overall publishing industry (“Agent and Former Publisher to Lead New Imprint for Amazon,” Bosman, 2011). It represents a further success in contracting content ownership and distribution, as Amazon moves to diversify itself whilst limiting traditional publishers, who do not have the distribution system to compete (Marcus, 2005).

With the exception of a few publishers like Baen Books (www.baen.com), publishers are not well situated to distribute directly to readers, and Baen have themselves now entered into a distribution deal with Amazon (“Baen Ebooks Kindles Relationship with Amazon,” 2012). It will be interesting to see whether Baen’s existent model of consumer behaviour will still give them an edge as they deal with a new outside distributor in order to meet greater demand.

With publishers demanding proprietary formats and working with just a few external distributors, the industry loses control of their own market. Instead, publishers may be better off embracing platform agnosticism, presenting open formats, working with many (smaller) distributors and focusing on publisher unique values—such as MP3-like inter-audience communicability. The developments discussed here suggest that it may be a more profitable path for publishers to engage with a number of different

distributors, allowing them to directly respond to consumer usage, rather than selling only to distributor channels as businesses.

Windowing and Access

The “threat” of piracy or unauthorised access and a projected swamping of the market by digital copies is used by producers to limit intra-consumer lending (authorised or not) of digital files, content that would otherwise be almost perfectly suited to more open distribution. There are a number of ways publishers achieve this control, one being the staggering of format releases (hardcover, paperback, ebook, etc.) in order to maximise legitimate sales. As Erica Glass says, “due to new concerns about the security of our digital editions, we find it necessary to delay the availability of our new titles in the digital format while we resolve these concerns with our business partners” (Penguin spokesperson, Glass, quoted by Kelley, 2011, para. 2). Delaying availability is another way for publishers to use the new technology to control “legitimate” access to ebooks, to drive sales of the entrenched print model. “Publishers do delay the release of e-books to encourage hardcover sales — a process called ‘windowing’” (Cohen, 2010, para. 4).

Evidence from film DVD windowing shows a different story:

Hollywood is leaving money on the table — and is in turn failing to address a root cause of piracy — by preserving its separate release windows. Based on our analysis of seven large nations, we find that in most countries, every week customers have to wait before they can buy a DVD translates into, on average, 1.8 per cent lower DVD sales. Given that good-quality pirated versions are available close to 14 weeks before the legal versions, the losses can be in the millions of dollars (Smith and Telang, 2011, para. 6).

Windowing can work for the book publishing industry as a whole, if not for individual authors. One illustrative example is the hardcover edition of *Game Change* (Heilemann and Halperin, 2010). The ebook edition did not go on sale until February 23, weeks after the January 11 date of the hardcover. After the first print run had sold out with seventy thousand copies “... bookstores around the country had no copies in stock. *The authors and the publisher were deprived of income* [emphasis mine], as potential readers found other books to buy” (Auletta, 2010, p. 5). The idea is that by windowing the release, publishers should be able to sell the higher profit margin hardcover to an audience who may otherwise look for the cheaper ebook. What this means is that as a

broad business, ebook windowing may or may not harm total sales of pbooks, *if* publishers can meet the total demand for general reading. It may not impact total print sales, but for individual authors, the artificial constraint of windowing can limit their potential sales.

Amazon's Russ Grandinetti thinks that windowing is a mistake for purposes of maximising book marketing:

"It won't work," he says. "Over time, people will read what they want. When a book comes out, authors need all the publicity they can get. To put up an arbitrary barrier and keep it out of the hands of someone who might evangelize that work is a bad business decision for the author. Not to mention frustrating for the customer" (quoted in Auletta, 2010, para. 31).

While the evidence may suggest it is foolish for publishers to work against their own customer's desires, ultimately the publishers and their entrenched print-centric business model could be seen as another expression of control—as a move against the shift toward the dominance of digital distributors like Amazon.

Ownership versus Licensing

Distribution and value chains are also related to issues of ownership and licensing—not only *how* digital affects distribution but in *what* is actually delivered, that is, not only the form of the product but the delivery method of the digital file "object" itself. Technology can be used to influence the ongoing struggle over content control, an issue seen most clearly in special cases such as library lending rights.

HarperCollins publishers made a move in early 2011 to limit the lending occurrences of library-purchased ebooks, putting a cap of 26 loans on each electronic copy licensed (Hadro, 2011). HarperCollins claimed this figure had come from considering such practicalities as the "wear and tear on circulating [print] copies" (Marwell, President, Sales for HarperCollins, as quoted by Hadro, 2011, para. 5). However, this puts an artificial limitation on the replicable nature of ebooks, one of the format's primary advantages.

Of course, many other publishers simply will not sell ebooks to libraries at all, fearing market cannibalisation (Fialkoff, 2011). However, George Coe, VP for libraries and education at Baker & Taylor, said at Digital Book World, 2011, the "acquisition

model will change drastically [with ebooks] ... Library budgets can't change, but users can become buyers with 'buy buttons' on library online catalogs." Coe suggests that by locking libraries out of the field, publishers may in fact be losing a powerful sales channel (reported by Fialkoff, 2011, para. 7).

The real issue here is actually ownership versus licensing, with publishers using the law and their distribution rights to limit how libraries and users can use an ebook file. Under US copyright law and the first sale doctrine (copyright Section 109(a)), users are provided an exception to the distribution right:

Notwithstanding the provisions of section 106 (3), the owner of a particular copy or phonorecord lawfully made under this title, or any person authorized by such owner, is entitled, without the authority of the copyright owner, to sell or otherwise dispose of the possession of that copy or phonorecord (*Copyright Act 1976* (United States of America), section 109a).

The meaning of this clause is that when a work is sold, or given away, the copyright owner's interest in the embodied *object* is exhausted. This exemption gives the owner of the object a limited right to the (re-)distribution of an otherwise protected work (without which, the new possessor of the object would have to negotiate terms for all actions, up to, and including, disposal). This is basic property law, akin to the argument often made against ebook ownership, that with print, no copyright owner can barge into your home and legally remove the pbooks from your shelves.

Relating this doctrine to electronic files is difficult, however. While under European law the re-sale of software (arguably the "purest" form of digital text) is allowable (Voakes, 2012), the U.S. Copyright Office says it should not apply to digital copies: "the tangible nature of a copy is a defining element of the first-sale doctrine and critical to its rationale" ("Executive Summary: Digital Millennium Copyright Act: Section 104 Report," n.d.). If so, then the argument must be that a digital "copy" must actually be considered a licence, and not ownership. That is, when held under these provisions—if the transmission from one purchaser to another of a digital file is considered breach to the copyright holder's reproduction and distribution control—legally sold copies must default to a replicable *licence* and not a sale.

The book publishing industry would not necessarily want to follow this path, however, because whilst it would give control over their product, it would further complicate the management of the file / licence experience. It also allows middlemen

operators, such as Overdrive (www.overdrive.com) in the library sector, to gain entrance to the industry *between* publishers and their customers, as with the case of distributors. Further, this opens publishers to a new problem of revenue splitting. The music industry, having struggled over the same issue regarding control, is only now dealing with the ramifications of licensing. Rob Zombie, et al. has taken UMG Recordings to court (*Rob Zombie v UMG Recordings, Inc.*, 2011) over discrepancies between accounting for digital music “sales” (~10-20% royalty to the artist) and music “licences” (~50% of revenue royalties). Previously, record labels relied on the idea of selling music at the lower royalty rate, however the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit recently ruled that the terms of use imposed on end users made the “sales” in fact *licence* conditions (*F.B.T. Productions, LLC, et al. v. Aftermath Records, et al.*, 2010; *McPherson*, 2011). As such, *Rob Zombie v UMG Recordings, Inc.* (2011) is looking to recover monetary discrepancies. This means that in order to have this licensing control, the music industry, and likely the book publishing industry, opens themselves up to new and expensive areas of contract law in dealing with this ambiguity of terms.

Another significant move related to sales versus licensing is that of Amazon’s Kindle Owner’s Lending Library (*Amazon.com, Inc.*, 2011c), which allows Amazon Prime members to borrow up to one “free” ebook from a selection per month. For an Amazon customer, this appears like a lending license, but what is interesting is the manner in which Amazon is sourcing these ebooks:

The “vast majority” are there following an agreement with the publishers to include the books for a fixed fee, while “in some cases”, Amazon said it was purchasing the title under standard wholesale terms each time it is borrowed (Flood, 2011, para. 3).

Once again, as in the erstwhile Amazon Wholesaler subsidisation strategy, this is a distributor taking the fight to customers in order to set the perceived value of ebooks below what publishers believe to be sustainable. While the Author’s Guild argued that this is a breach of contract (*Author’s Guild*, 2011), it is still uncertain how the courts may decide this case (a case which is still pending, *Author’s Guild*, 2012).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that there is still money in the content industries,

although it may need to be recalculated down from premium heights, as seen regarding LP transitioning to CD. Users will still pay if they are provided a simple way to buy digital versions, as both Apple and Amazon have found.

However, the main issue dealt with in this chapter is the split of money between producers and distributors. The very attempt to control the way users access and consume material can actually work to move the ratio of profits away from the artists and producers, instead giving money and power to distributors. The lessons of the music industry show there are possibilities here for publishers to act, along with authors themselves, instead of relying on third parties to maintain control over the product. The evidence from both the music and film industries suggests that it may be better for publishers to abandon artificial control mechanisms, and instead create a closer relationship with their own consumers in order to direct their whole industry instead of micromanaging files.

Chapter Two: Sales Models and the Book Form

In this chapter, I look at possibilities for authors and publishers to make use of their texts in order to heighten the perceived value of their product. I examine various economic models book publishers use to attempt to reconfigure the channels of paid distribution; such as charging directly via micropayments, or with free, ad-based entry-level services, the “freemium” model. While it is important to note that there are distributors and publishers having success in selling ebooks direct to consumers (Apple’s iBookstore, Amazon’s Kindle store, O’Reilly Books, Baen Books, etc.), it is also significant to look at other models being used to sell ebooks. These different models can be used to mediate “issues” like piracy and access, by better attracting attention to their distribution in a crowded market. This chapter will also look at new experiments with book form that target new, as yet un-met audiences.

Micropayments and Serials

Micropayment systems offer an example of the potential of digital distribution for the book publishing industry. The micropayment model was supposed to supplement, or even replace, advertising revenue by requesting a small amount of money per view of content pages online (Hershman, 1999). Developed by computer companies such as Compaq and IBM, it was claimed that micropayments would allow “vendors and merchants to sell content, information, and services over the Internet for amounts as low as one cent” (IBM Micro Payments, 2000, para. 1).

Of course, as Clay Shirky notes, micropayments are unpopular with users (2000, para. 11), who want predictable pricing.

Micropayments, meanwhile, waste the users’ mental effort in order to conserve cheap resources, by creating many tiny, unpredictable transactions.

Micropayments thus create in the mind of the user both anxiety and confusion (2000, para. 13).

Practically speaking, credit providers do not support such low-threshold micropayments, either, due to the administrative costs for each payment making it difficult to put into place en masse (Peabody in Mercator Advisory Group, 2007).

However, as Mitchell observes, “without many people noticing, micropayments

have arrived—just not in the way they were originally envisioned. The 99 cents you pay for a song on iTunes is a micropayment” (2007, para. 2). In this case, Apple offsets most of the credit provider costs. In the music industry, it can be seen that there is a willingness to pay this level of micropayment for discrete art works (Makkonen, Halttunen & Frank, 2011; Amberg & Schröder, 2007; Kwong & Park, 2008).

Makkonen, Halttunen and Frank note an interesting tension regarding the way that micropayments are viewed in the context of whole artworks, as opposed to smaller, discreet works such as a hit music single. In research that interviewed young music consumers about their content acquisition methods, they found that:

Another relative advantage of paid intangible channels was the possibility to purchase single songs in addition to full albums, which made it possible to acquire music content more selectively. However, this advantage was not appreciated by all the interviewees, and some still preferred purchasing full albums instead of single songs because they perceived albums as works of art which should not be split into pieces (2011, p. 899-900).

Micropayments can be awkward because they break up the smooth engagement audiences have with what would otherwise be perceived as a “whole” text. It is also an issue with the digital distribution of whole book texts. Can a whole book be split, or does that disrupt the “art” of the whole. More importantly to publishers, does the delivery method of parts introduce consumer anxiety? There is certainly an argument for the “gamification” of narrative—using game-like processes to engage users (Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011), for example, paying to “unlock” the resolution of cliffhangers. However, this points to a specific kind of text, and would not be applicable to all (or most) books.

Author Stephen King tried a direct-to-consumer, novel-by-installment experiment with *The Plant* (2000a), an example that shows how the form of audience engagement can affect project success. The potential for disruption to traditional publishing was there for a well-known author to act upon, and King was reported to be very enthusiastic:

If I were to do something like that, whether they wanted to or not, it would force a lot of people to read online. I would love to do something like that because I think we’re at a point where there are maybe a dozen writers who could literally change the way people regard reading (quoted in Sachs, 2000, para. 3).

The novel was to be hosted by King himself on his own website, without encryption

(DRM), and with payment made by an honour system. According to The New York Times, King wrote on his website at the time “my friends. . . we have the chance to become Big Publishing’s worst nightmare” (Dubner, 2000, para. 8). King would have control, and he would have the profits. To begin with it did seem to be a success, with King self-reporting in August 2000 that Part 1 had good downloads and a strong pay-through. However, Part 2 was more uncertain, with downloads remaining strong, but a “widening disparity between downloads and payments” developing (King, 2000c, para. 2). He had always claimed that as long as at least 600 readers paid US\$1/installment (a 75% pay-through of 800 downloads), that he would continue the serialisation for as long as it took (2000c).

What was behind the disparity of downloads and payment between downloads for Parts 1 and 2? King does allow for readers not engaging with the work, but says:

There is undoubtedly some thievery and bootlegging going on, but Marsha and I believe the real problem may lie elsewhere. It appears to us that some people are downloading two and even three times to different formats—to the Palm Pilot say, and also to whatever Microsoft uses. This may be based on a simple misperception. Let me put it this way: you couldn’t go into a bookstore and say, “I want you to give me the paperback version and the audio version of this book free because I bought the hardcover.” As simply as I can put it, you must pay for what you take every time you take it or this won’t work (2000c).

It is significant that King considered selling the same text in differing propriety formats as a metric for success, rather than introducing the text to a reader—however that was achieved. Instead, perhaps there were always fewer readers than he thought. King was literally asking for readers to pay for the same content multiple times. Unlike different paper gauges, one text file format is equal to another text file format; it is unlike the labour of paid actors recording to audio format. This view of King’s is a continuation of the diminishment of consumer rights (Levy, 2000b). What King was likely seeing was evidence that his readers considered the experiences of reading were equitable to the experience of . . . reading. Readers did not see a distinction between file formats.

Ultimately, *The Plant’s* (2000a) paying readership continued to dwindle, from a height of 120 000 paying readers of Part 1, to a low of 40 000 downloaders by Part 5 (“King Closure,” 2000). The New York Times argued that the experiment in digital distribution:

was based on a false premise. When the first installment of “The Plant” was published, analogies were drawn to Victorian serial publication, to Dickens ... But one reads Stephen King novels in a single gulp. Their chief effect is suspense of a kind that cannot be drawn out over months. ... “The Plant” withered mainly because its author misunderstood the nature of his readership (“King Closure,” 2000, para. 3).

King responded to this opinion piece in a note *The Plant: Getting a Little Goofy* on his website (2000d), stating that he did not think it was an issue of genre, but that it was due to his readership—and the nature of electronic texts themselves:

Book-readers don’t regard electronic books as real books. ... Since *The Plant* experiment began in July, I’ve had dozens of people come up to me and say that they can’t wait to read the story - when it’s in book form. ... In truth, I don’t believe the on-line publication of *The Plant* has done more than graze whatever potential it might have as a book. ... we seem to have discovered an entirely new dimension to the sort of publishing which used to be called “first serial rights” (2000d, para. 7).

This demonstrates precisely how he—and indeed his *readers*—thought of *The Plant* as a precursor to traditional print publication—a static text, merely released in segments. While looking at *The Plant* historically, perhaps it was that King’s readership just wasn’t ready for an online book, as they would be now with more acceptances of online payments, to read on electronic readers and tablets, but the case must be taken on its own merits and while readers began the story, many ceased following it.

Consider the effect of the expectation confirmation (Oliver, 1977; Spreng, 1996) and gratifications (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973-74) theories on how readers consume material doled-out in a serial manner. The concept of expectation confirmation theory suggests that if the performance of a product—here assumed to be a print-like text—has a negative disconfirmation—such as breaking at a pbook-constrained “chapter” mark rather than a serialised cliffhanger moment, then readers are going to be disinclined to continue. They were expecting the analogue of a pbook, within a serialised ebook form, and so whilst they assumed they wanted chapter breaks, that in fact worked against the gratification of the form itself, which suggests many smaller climaxes in order to build attention at the end of each part, toward the purchase of the next installment. In this way, the gratifications sought, versus the gratifications obtained, are at the core of the reader’s negative disconfirmation (Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985).

Shin says, applying the expectation and gratification theories to ebook technologies and content:

As people increasingly turn to the web for the sort of content they used to get from books, their expectations for that content will change. Those changing expectations will undoubtedly have an impact on the development of future e-readers, not to mention future e-books (2010, p271).

The expectations of serialised content can be seen in the rise of online fan fiction, and the soap opera styling of that content—particularly the ongoing, non-bounded nature of fan fiction (Williams, 2011).

The evidence of reader gratification may then suggest that it is the serial online publication of a static text that is the issue. Tad Williams' *Shadowmarch* (2005), was created as an online serial (2001-2002), and later re-written into a traditional pbook. Originally written in present tense for the Web serial, Williams said, "I started out in the third person, but as I thought of it as an episodic story—as something that just *stops* until the next episode—I liked the idea of it living in the present tense" (Williams, 2001, para. 2). However, for the transition to print, it was re-written into past tense, in order to suit the less immediate style of the pbook delivery format—the extended nature of engagement draws out the sense of satisfaction that smaller sections deliver at the end of each release. This change shows that what may work as an online serial might not work in print, and vice versa.

King seems to suggest that breaking a "whole" book down is not a problem, but that the engagement style of reading an online book is different and less cohesive than print. What this suggests is that while "first print rights" —testing the waters for whole works by piecemeal publication online—are a new and quite profitable avenue for authors, both King's and Williams' experiments in selling a text in pieces online shows an inherently different reading experience. It is not only a case of different distribution, but also a different author-reader connection.

Nano-fictions and SMS Novels

Williams' difficulty with print versus online serial writing suggests there is a possibility of stories written natively for a connected digital medium. The delivery form of a digital

text causes the reading experience of it to be altered, and so must be taken into consideration when creating these works. To examine the effect of immediacy and broken delivery, a better experiment could be found in the recent examples of “Twitter novels.”

Twitter stories, or “nano” stories, are pieces of fiction that are delivered by the online Twitter service, which restricts messages sent to a maximum of 140 characters at a time. It demands a kind of brevity that has necessitated a re-working of writing for both conciseness and contraction. Significantly for work published over Twitter, the text comes as a stream of fragments directed to your account. If you miss reading a piece, the next sections or parts are not disrupted and arrive regardless—unlike *The Plant* (2000a) which required a reader to actively download completed sections one at a time.

There have been a number of experiments with the form, seeking to present viable, engaging material given the constraints. One example is R.L. Stine’s Twitter-based short story, *The Brave Kid* (2012a). Reading this in order (at Boog, 2012b), the reader encounters two main issues: on Stine’s Twitter page, it is published in reverse order, making it difficult to understand. Additionally, the individual published pieces are quite meaningless by themselves: “... A storm came up. Winds shook the windows. The lights went out. Kids ducked under desks. The teacher said it was bad luck...” (Stine, 2012b). The text does not utilise the attributes of the delivery method; such as capitalising on the casual engagement style of the medium. Contrast this to Jeff Noon, who tweets: “If your edges fade, go immediately to one of our recharging posts. Don’t worry, your fame will last for 24 hours before disintegrating” (Noon, 2012), the message here is brief but complete. Or the edited, paying market of Twitter publication Nanoism, which describes itself as “not just catering to the 21st-century attention span, we’re publishing flexible fiction: stories that you can read on your computer or cellphone, stories that fit in the cracks of your day” (Nanoism, 2011). Such examples make use of the specific form, as Margaret Atwood describes the writing on Twitter, which is at its best, “sort of like haikus [and] prose” (“Margaret Atwood says Twitter, Internet Boost Literacy,” 2011). The text must meet the uses and expectations of its delivery form.

Japanese SMS novels show a strong understanding of the digital delivery form. They are a subscription service through which readers receive updates to the story every

day (Amaranthine, 2007). Due to this staggered release, the works are often written in response to reader demands.

Yoshi, a former prep-school instructor who sees his readers as “a community,” reads the dozens of e-mail messages teenage fans send him daily and uses their material for story ideas. He also knows immediately when readers are getting bored and changes the plot when access tallies start dipping for his stories. “It’s like playing live music at a club,” he said. “You know right away if the audience isn’t responding, and you can change what you’re doing right then and there” (“Cell Phones Put to Novel Use,” 2005, para. 25-27).

Such immediate and dynamic writing is a reflection of the media through which it is authored and delivered. Further, in 2007, five out of the ten best-selling novels in Japan were originally distributed by SMS and on mobile phones (Onishi, 2008). These “cell phone novels” are now transforming to new requirements as they are placed into print. Popular works are being picked up for sale in ebook editions, leading to questions over the suitability of one (digital) genre moving to another (print), as it is being found with new formats for cell phone novels:

“When a work is written on a computer, the nuance of the number of lines is different, and the rhythm is different from writing on a cellphone,” said Keiko Kanematsu, an editor at Goma Books... “Some hard-core fans wouldn’t consider that a cellphone novel.”

... But at least one member of the cellphone generation has made the switch to computers. “[Since] her vocabulary’s gotten richer and her sentences have also grown longer” (Onishi, 2008, para. 24, 27-29).

These examples suggest that if the particular advantages of the format are considered, then digital texts may be better suited for digital distribution. It is important for authors and publishers to note that while both styles of prose can be considered to make up a “book,” there already exist different writing conventions that deal with the issues of reader engagement for alternate distribution forms. This is a case where authors may make informed artistic decisions to mediate and meet the demands of the delivery format. Selling work online may in this case be viable given an awareness of the text’s delivery limitations and opportunities. However, there remains the issue of the audience’s willingness to pay for pieces of an artistic whole. The iTunes song model works for music singles, but is still not equal to the piecemeal delivery of a larger work of fiction.

Subscription Models

An alternative to the anxieties of micropayments—and the attendant disruptions to engaging with whole artistic works—is subscription “streaming,” which involves ongoing payment for access to uninterrupted textual engagement. This delivery option is incremental, but also real-time as the audience engages with the material. It is a model that draws “micropayments” mainly from the advertisers, not the audience. These services supply an “all you can eat” selection of tracks or titles, bundling the entirety of the selection together. The bundling helps to broaden the service’s audience appeal, and so heightens the worth of the business network in order to sell advertising space (Thomes, 2011). I will look at this model as a possible source for ebook revenues and profits—and explore the attendant issues surrounding artistic integrity regarding advertising.

Spotify, as a prominent example of a service which “streams” music from a cloud server to devices, bases itself on a “Freemium” model; it is ad-funded and free-to-consumer, but also offers a premium subscription service for paying customers (Wilson, 2006). There are new examples of similar models in the ebook market, including 24symbols (2012), a form of subscription for ebooks that has been inspired by the “success” of services like Spotify (Roman, 2011). Advertising is not enough to generate sufficient profit, however, and the model is based on the assumption that users used to free music / content (authorised or unauthorised) will eventually transition to a paid service, without cannibalising existing channels. The evidence shows previously unauthorised downloaders being transformed into “paid” freemium subscribers (Makkonen, Halttunen and Frank, 2011, p. 898; Elizabet Widlund, Music Sweden’s CEO in Nylander, 2012). “The new services are often attracting people who previously shared files illegally. According to research by one of the major record companies, nearly two-thirds of Spotify users say they now engage in less piracy” (Pfanner, 2009, para. 10). Spotify says they provide a:

Viable alternative to music piracy. We think the way forward is to create a service better than piracy, thereby converting users into a legal, sustainable alternative which also enriches the total music experience (Andres Sehr, Spotify’s Global Community Manager, to Ernesto, 2009, para. 3).

“The total music experience” is key. The payment per listen is relatively small,

as opposed to direct sales of discrete products—though Anderson (2004) would likely note that a streaming service promotes an ongoing revenue stream, where each payment may be small, but is recurring per user engagement. The problems of payment via Spotify (and other streaming services) versus that of direct-pay sites like iTunes came to light when the band *Uniform Motion* stated their 2011 revenues (Cedeno, 2011). The band reported that for a solo artist to earn a US minimum wage they must sell 1, 161 retail CDs, or an absurd 4, 053, 110 monthly plays of the album on Spotify. This resulted in a number of smaller labels pulling out of Spotify, saying that “there [does] [sic] not appear to be an upside” to being a part of the service (Prosthetic (label) co-owner E.J. Johantgen, via Roche, 2011, para. 3).

Mike Masnick of *Techdirt* (2011) points out the fallacy in this line of thinking: Spotify is not a sole revenue stream, but a part of a whole business plan. Treating it as the whole of the market is inevitably going to look bad. Rather, Masnick notes that streaming services are a fantastic way to redirect casual listeners into directly paying ones (see also: Sundaresan, et. al., 2011; Makkonen, Halttunen & Frank, 2011; Amberg & Schröder, 2007). The evidence from these studies is that free access can become paid use, and so the overall revenue issues are not a direct problem of Spotify and their business model. However, the licensing issues are a precursor to their viability, because music labels are trying to situate these streaming services as if they are the whole market of music. Mr Brown, Managing Director of Spotify’s British arm, told the New York Times how, just as revenue was doubling at the time:

Costs are rising, too, because Spotify and similar services pay royalties to rights holders, including music companies, every time a track is streamed. Those payments are turning into a promising revenue source for the record companies (Pfanner, 2009, para. 19-20).

As an additional revenue stream, this appears a healthy move by the music industry. However, when you begin to examine the rights deals as negotiated, it is clear that the labels attempt to defray any losses of their own onto the streaming services. This means that the labels will either make a lot of money from the new services, or the new services themselves will fail totally. Michael Robertson, founder and former CEO of MP3.com, current CEO of personal cloud music service MP3tunes, says “the supplier will always elect the formula that captures the largest amount of money for themselves, completely

disregarding the financial viability of the store” (2011, para. 2). These deals allow the music labels to set a de facto sale / access price for distributors.

The wholesale model works for music because they are coming from an existent digital sales model (i.e. iTunes), but the economics look different to publishing, as the music model is based on an inflated per song charge and not on whole published art works. It is quite different to the publisher’s attempted agency system, which attempted to set consumer sales expectations for a new digital market of single-purchase items. However, both approaches seek to disrupt more flexible distribution channels: from “free” services like Napster (www.napster.com) in music, to Amazon’s pricing flexibility in book sales (even after the price-fixing settlement, Amazon may radically discount pricing on one book, if they compensate the publisher in other areas (*United States of America v Apple, Inc.*, 2012; and in Europe, European Commission, 2012)). Indeed, publishing likely could have followed a similar strategy to music, by increasing wholesaler terms, from around \$15 per ebook (*United States of America v Apple, Inc.*, 2012, p. 17) to around \$25—tripling Amazon’s losses on each copy they then sold at a subsidised \$10. It is in precisely this way that music labels attempt to squeeze out streaming competitors, by charging the new service higher licence fees than a service like Spotify could then pass on to a user.

However, for both wholesale and agency models, the producer attacks on competitors have created branding issues. Studios have found, following legal attacks on peer-to-peer file sharing, it is the *labels and artists*, not “Napster” and “Pirate Bay,” which suffer reputational damage (Marshall, 2002). This is the main rationale for labels limiting their engagement with the more flexible, streaming models—they do not want to encourage businesses that compete with their own pricing policies. This same concern will also likely be involved in publisher responses to similar opportunities. It is somewhat of a lose / lose proposition for media owners, however; lower expected prices, or suffer damage to their consumer brand.

If you consider streaming services as an adjunct to a whole product market, however, the situation is different. While they cannot carry the whole market, labels have moved in to hold an equity stake in the streaming businesses themselves, and seen in this cooperative light, the services may still be a successful part of a broader industry

response to the digital shift. While this is something book publishers have not yet tried in a full-scale manner, there are experiments like Safari Books Online (<http://my.safaribooksonline.com/>) (a part of O'Reilly Books), who have recently acquired PubFactory (<http://www.pubfactory.com/>) in order to build their subscription services out beyond their own published content (Savikas, 2013). Acquiring such services then cushions the labels, by making them both content owner and distributor by proxy.

Music industry commentators like Lindvall (2009) and Pfanner (2009) call the business deals where the studios demand this equity stake and buy-in, without passing on the profits to their own signed artists, “blackbox.” According to Lindvall, this is “non-attributable revenue that remains with the label” (2009, para. 9) not the artist—perhaps the very reason Bob Dylan requested his music be removed from Spotify, as a move to negotiate greater streaming revenue from his label Columbia directly (Bruno, 2011).

In this context, music companies can't lose, but the streaming services (as independent businesses) certainly can. The problems for streaming services are not only due to the difficult revenue agreements labels demand, but also because of the impact these restrictions then have on the service's hoped for audience. As noted above, the “total music experience” (Ernesto, 2009) is directly impacted by the label's actions. “The utility that consumers associate with a download store is likely to depend on the number of different titles offered by that particular store” (Papies, Eggers & Wlömert, 2011, p. 782, citing Sinha & Mandel, 2008). The ease with which a user can use one service to meet all their music consumption needs is important to their continued use of that service. Spotify is unable to achieve this (and likely ebook streaming services like 24Symbols will have similar problems), because the streaming services are being asked to virtually support a whole industry—as per claims they do not pay as well as direct album sales, while not being fully supported in the task.

Instead of battling alternative access services, Papies, Eggers & Wlömert (2011) note that:

Content owners should therefore ensure that free, ad-based services can establish themselves in the market because, *in combination with incumbent business models* [emphasis mine], free, ad-based services can be used to segment the

market... This market segmentation is possible because ad-based services barely cannibalize existing demand. One way of fostering ad-based services might be granting attractive royalty payments when negotiating licensing contracts to ensure the take-off of these services (p. 789-90.)

Given that streaming services do not significantly impact on existing sales figures, rather, they act more to aid user discovery of content—as well as form their own, limited revenue stream. The sampling power of these services, along with exposure and a persistent, parallel revenue stream, could be better utilised to meet un-tapped audience demand.

While incumbent fears of cannibalisation are involved, part of the issue is due to global rights restrictions. Pandora Radio's Australian site said, after a 2007 copyright ruling (Shinal, 2011) that:

We are deeply, deeply sorry to say that due to licensing constraints, we can no longer allow access to Pandora for listeners located outside of the U.S. We will continue to work diligently to realize the vision of a truly global Pandora, but for the time being we are required to restrict its use (Pandora Media, Inc., 2012, accessed 2012, January 18).

Users were once able to use the service from Australia, but were then restricted (until recently, Griffith, 2012). This is potentially problematic action for the content industries to take; if they remove an existing, legal sampling service that may leave once-paying customers with only unauthorised avenues to find content. Instead, the copyright protections used here actually serve to limit the producer's ability to meet demand. Rather, in order to meet consumer demand, producers and publishers could try to locate the broader spaces in which audiences seek their material. In streaming, there is a revenue source that allows them to distribute appropriate digital content, for discovery by audiences.

Ironically, by combatting the streaming “threat,” producers only limit—and further *damage*—their own brand. It may be better to embrace new distribution and publishing streams as market growth. There are issues involved, but they might be better seen as product creation opportunities, not business problems.

Advertising in Books

Part of the way freemium services such as Spotify make their money is via advertising. How would such a model translate to the book? How might this more intrusive revenue

stream affect readers, and their tolerance for advertising when it is directly interpolated within an ebook text itself? The *Wall Street Journal* broached this as an inevitability for ebook publishing (Adner & Vincent, 2010), stating that, unlike many arguments for the involute nature of the book form, it has in fact merely been for purely *situational* reasons that we have not yet widely seen such advertisements:

In short, physical books can't compete with other print media for advertisers. Digital books can. With an integrated system, an advertiser or publisher can place ads across multiple titles to generate a sufficient volume. Timeliness is also possible, since digital readers require users to log in to a central system periodically (Adner & Vincent, 2010, para. 8).

Digital book advertising can allow publishers to offset publications costs, by much the same method which newspapers offset their printing costs, and to be managed much the same way as a newspaper's online counterpart (Evans, 2009; Bergemann & Bonatti, 2011). But are books a reasonable site for these kinds of materials? Do they disrupt text, or do they, rather, alter it?

In order to examine these issues, we should look at how advertisements embedded within immersive texts actually work, and how they might affect the reading experience. The main research on this matter has been regarding product placement in film and television; however, books are a different form of media, immersive, rather than passive. The reader must more fully engage with the written text, supplying more of his or her own sensory experience toward completing the narrative (Iser, 1972). While it is true there are already advertising-based textual platforms (blogs, for example), they are not developed textual narratives (i.e. "books"), and so peripheral advertisements are already segregated as linked components, not integral parts. Text requires more effort than television, where significant experiences are presented directly to the viewer. With the increasing migration of 18-34 year old men from watching television shows toward playing computer games (Lewis & Porter, 2010), there is increasing concern from advertisers and media producers regarding how to engage with consumers.

A number of critics have looked at how audiences respond to immersive media ad placements (Reynolds, 2004; Lewis & Porter, 2010).

Nielsen Entertainment and Activision conducted a study among 1,350 male gamers aged 13-44 years and found "67 percent of gamers *believe in-game advertising makes games more realistic* and 40 percent of male gamers say in-game ads influence their purchasing decisions" (Wegert 2005, p. 8).

Furthermore, most gamers who recalled a product advertised in a game believed that the advertisement “fit the game they were playing” (Activision 2005, p. 4) ... Seamless integration is a crucial factor in successful in-game advertising. If a marketing message interrupts immersion or makes the experience appear less realistic, the advertiser has failed (Lewis and Porter, 2010, p. 47-48).

Lewis and Porter examined the responses of two main groups of Role-Playing game players; placing ads within their games, ads that were congruent with the game theme in one instance, and incongruent ads for another. “The incongruent group agreed significantly more that they would pay more for an advertising-free version of a video game than did the congruent group” (2010, p. 53). Ironically, such *incongruent* ads had a much greater recall rate than those which fit the game theme (p. 48)—meaning the follow-through of bad advertising may be more worthwhile for producers, but it would disrupt the relationship between owner and audience. What was not explored, however, was whether this desire for an ad-free form might lead to unauthorised use. Increased infringement could mediate the positive effects for advertisers by limiting the audience pool.

Certainly, advertising may be effective, but the comment I find relevant to the issue for book publishing is that “gamers believe [congruent] in-game advertising makes games more realistic” (Wegert, 2005, p. 8). This suggests that well-fitting advertisements may actually form a kind of paratext themselves (as argued by Gray, 2010), and could thus help situate the work of the text as more realistic. Such an eventuality could then make in-book advertising, not only a source of revenue, but also a source for greater audience engagement.

The use of products [in text] is not unique. Chick lit books are littered with product placement. (I view these as writing “cheats” because they provide an urban cache to a heroine without actually having to show the reader that the heroine is urban) (Litte, 2006, para. 3).

Product placement uses advertising as a transmedia paratext, allowing the reader to locate other connections and to develop further context. Rich (2006) discusses the ad placement of “Cover Girl” makeup in young adult novels:

Such deals are not unprecedented. Five years ago, Bulgari, the Italian jewelry company, paid Fay Weldon an undisclosed amount to feature the brand prominently in her novel, entitled — what else? — “The Bulgari Connection.”

... “What we are selling here to the customer or the reader is an experience that transcends the book itself,” said David Steinberger, president and chief executive of [publisher] Perseus (Rich, 2006, para. 7 and 22).

The specifics of advertising placement may limit the lifespan of a book, and may not work for all genres, but may also act as a new drive for texts by demanding current ad placements. Such a system could mediate any decrease in potential book sales caused by digital distribution, by providing a new source of patronage and so cause new texts to be authored.

There is significant argument against this kind of cross advertising, as it is perceived as damaging the involute nature of literature. This rather elitist point of view arises from the idea of a book as an object to be preserved, rather than a cultural function of knowledge to be engaged with (van Dijck, 2004; Jackson, 2001; Jenkins, 1992). It should be noted that the ebook medium is coming from a very different background from other advertising-supported material, such as television, which started in that way and so has a pre-conceived notion of advertising intrusion. Of course, not all advertising will perform a synergetic relationship with the book text, however, the book as object fits within a history of advertising; 1960s and 70s paperbacks with inset ad plates, often for cigarettes after bans on radio and television advertising, are now collector’s items (Collins, 2007). Collins notes part of the attraction to this material is:

If the mark of a classic is that every time you read it you discover something new, then the 1972 paperback of A. E. Van Vogt’s science-fiction novel “Quest for the Future” just might be a classic. Those who read the book when it was first published in hardcover in 1970 certainly won’t recognize this passage from Chapter 15: “A large gleaming machine with an opening at one end was wheeled in, and once again the cycle ran its Micronite Filter. Mild, Smooth Taste. For All the Right Reasons. Kent. America’s Quality Cigarette. King Size or Deluxe 100s” (2007, para. 1).

These very “intrusive” advertisements may in fact offer a new kind of paratextual engagement with a book. The new paratexts need not be so crassly achieved, as above, but the book text and advertising paratext may serve to create a new reader-text relationship. These ads are not only forming a new revenue source, but also helping to create hooks for an audience to relate with. There is now Amazon’s “Kindle with Special Offers,” which offers contextual advertising based upon your reading history (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?nodeId=200671290>). Further,

whilst Amazon's ads are too new for particular studies, the anecdotal response is that as targeted offers, users may actually like them (Wikert, 2011).

However, such paratextual advertisements may also further act to lock users in to a particular distributor's platform. Stephen King's new attempt at an online offering, *UR* (2009), is a Kindle exclusive about a "haunted" Amazon Kindle. *Publisher's Weekly* commented: "while King can certainly spin a good story, the Amazon Kindle focus... keeps this one feeling like an advertising gimmick" (2010, para. 1).

The parallel revenue stream of advertising could be worthwhile, but other than the limited in-house advertising which a book publisher or author may make use of between titles published by that group, book publishers are not generally in the business of targeted advertising; and certainly not to the same extent that their platform partners, such as Amazon and Apple are. Publisher's lack of experience in direct advertising—and their resulting reliance on powerful distributors—creates a further motivation for content producers to engage with alternative distribution streams and companies.

New Media Channels

If erstwhile distributors like Amazon can move into the book publishing industry to broaden their portfolios, I believe it is possible for book publishers to diversify their own products on offer (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=1000664761>). Book publishing now shares many of its distribution channels with film and music (all being digital), so it may be possible for the industry to utilise those channels to both specialise their print product as a unique object—over and above the primary digital sale—and also to hybridise their product offerings. Currently, book publishing appears to be an industry perhaps more interested in a physical artefact (in direct response to the all-pervasiveness of digital content), given that they may then valorise and control the sales of a pbook more easily through their existing distribution channels. Conversely, however, publishing is also moving to develop a more open view to what constitutes a "book," to include "enhanced" multimedia works.

Book publishing is following music and film with a renewed focus on the non-downloadable artefact, developing "deluxe" physical product offerings. Two pertinent

examples are Radiohead's *In Rainbows* (2007a), and Doctorow's *With a Little Help* (2009a). *In Rainbows* came in multiple versions; including a "pay what you want" digital download that allowed users to pay nothing for the material if desired. Thom Yorke, the band's front man, said to *Wired* "every record for the last four—including my solo record—has been leaked. So the idea was like, we'll leak it, then" (Byrne, 2007, para. 11). A full release on CD followed later that year (Radiohead, 2007b). Between those releases, however, was their "discbox," which came with both CDs of the downloadable material as well as vinyl records of the same and additional booklet and art material. As a finite object of reasonable demand, this discbox had quite a high set price, nevertheless, it appears to have been successful selling around 100 000 copies (Music Ally, 2008). Science fiction writer Cory Doctorow, an author who is very active in performing publishing experiments, tried something new with his book *With a Little Help* (2009a). Like many of his earlier books, *With a little Help* was released digitally, under a Creative Commons "Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike" licence (Creative Commons, 2011). Unlike some of his other works released under this agreement, in this case Doctorow has requested donations under a similar pay-what-you-like clause (he normally asks for readers not to donate to him but to buy his traditionally published print editions, Doctorow, n.d.a). The significant difference with this book, is that he is self-publishing the print versions, and so he is looking to broaden the scope of his revenue without then impinging upon an otherwise existing traditional publishing contract (Doctorow, 2009b).

As with *In Rainbows*, Doctorow's print artefact is the central point of his business model. That is because the only business "model" here is the reliable, measurable revenue stream of ebook copies, whereas the digitally distributed "pay-what-you-want" material is not, by itself measurable. Mike Masnick (2008b) points out that this uncertainty does not diminish the concept of releasing material freely as a valuable part of a holistic business model. He argues that while "give it away and pray" is not a plan by itself, the market synergies developed with it can have a place in a wider plan. Citing a New York Times article on author Steven Poole (Pogue, 2008), in which Poole laments his disappointment at the rate of paying readers downloading his pay-what-you-want ebook, Masnick responds:

Poole seemed to have an expectation in his mind, he ends up being quite disappointed, noting that 1 out of every 1,750 downloads (0.057%) left some money. What's left implicit here is that that figure is too low. What this really means is that Poole didn't really give away the book for free. He had an expectation that people would magically pay for it. But, that's not a business model (2008b, para. 2).

Radiohead and Doctorow show they understand this concept far better than does Poole. The intent of these examples is to show that the economically measurable component of both *In Rainbows* and *With a Little Help* is based upon the finite structures of a still analogue audience. The lesson is that, by itself, digital is not as measurable, or reliable a revenue stream as print is currently. Digital sales are possible, but must be a part of the whole product environment, coupled with consumer externalities—subsidiary objects, extrinsic to the digital exchange, but whose value benefit from it, these externalities may include print, or premium modes of audience access. It is important to recognise this intrinsic instability of focusing on the purely digital. As it is now, digital often provides value to a whole textual ecology, but does not yet support it entirely.

Apps and Enhanced Books

Another way for publishing to increase sales may be via the practice of creating greater value for their readers with deluxe *digital* products. There is a long history of digital “Expanded Books” from Voyager Company, and multimedia works such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for Atari Research Group (Virshup, 1996). However, these are all formats that have never quite taken off in the public consciousness. Now, with the increase in handheld computing and smartphones, along with online and digital stores to *sell* this content, there is renewed interest in such forms, now called “enhanced books.”

Enhanced books take on similar multimedia materials as earlier digital books, and are designed for interactivity. While often touted as particularly useful for children, studies show this to be untrue, with enhanced ebooks less effective than simple p- and ebooks in education. This is because interactive ebooks call for more non-content related navigation choices (Chiong, Ree & Takeuchi, 2012), both increasing cognitive load (Edwards & Hardman, 1989; Nielsen, 1990), against an oppositional increase in retention by reading fixed print (Barab, Young & Wang, 1999; Eveland, Cortese, Park & Dunwoody, 2004). Importantly, this shows there are forms of interaction and

engagement that more traditional “print” (or linear and immersive, rather than open) interfaces facilitate better than do more involved media. The “enhanced book” may be worthwhile, but does not necessarily represent the broader strengths of both p- and ebooks.

While multimedia texts must draw upon skills extrinsic to book publishing, publishers are experts in the skills that suit the creation of static texts. The business implications are clear: these enhanced book apps, and their creation skill sets, are not a part of the book publishing industry, and instead publishers should look to focus on their own *textual* strengths. Jane Friedman, an ebook publisher that partners book authors with film makers and online creators, says, “the consumer is not asking for this... It takes it from being a reading experience to something else, and we are publishers” (quoted by Alter, 2012, para. 8). Oddly, Friedman’s *Open Road Media* (<http://www.openroadmedia.com/>) seeks to do exactly that, forging links between authors and other media concerns. As Allen Austen from Johns Hopkins University says:

Our industry seems increasingly to feel embarrassed about traditional books, as though they were stodgy and outmoded and better disguised as newer, more popular media...[But] while the e-book presents formal possibilities that are well worth exploring, not every e-book has to reinvent the wheel—and not every publisher should scramble to produce the kind that do, or even to produce e-books at all. Right now it’s at least as important for publishers to recognize what writing and illustration can do that other media cannot (quoting his work at the Abbeville Press Blog, 2012).

Perhaps this embarrassment is the issue, but it certainly is the case that the kind of links that *Open Road Media* are suggesting between authors and other media appear more like transmedia relationships than strictly literary ones (Kinder, 1991; Anderson, 2011). These may be useful connections to make, but they create a new kind of book publishing distribution class that may not only skew the expectations of the audience, but also upset the economics of the industry.

While a successful book app (an enhanced book) like Nick Cave’s *The Death of Bunny Monroe* (2009) can succeed by including non-textual material from outside publishing expertise, they are often an exception that proves the rule. In this case, the book is not only read aloud by the author, a successful music icon, but also comes packaged with a full soundtrack by the author himself and his award-winning

collaborator, Warren Ellis. This combination of skills is likely a contributing factor in its success, creating a business model that the whole industry cannot rely upon.

This is not to say that there are no good examples of enhanced book apps. A better example may be *The Waste Land* (Elliot, by way of Touch Press, 2011), which draws upon the wealth of *textual* and historical material that exists around the poem, and places them alongside the official text. This is a useful example, in that it demonstrates a way in which publisher paratexts can enhance a central text, although it also relies upon its historical antecedence, without which the extent of the material would be limited. *The Waste Land* has been successful in rapidly earning back its production costs (Dredge, 2011), though again, the existent material around this famous poem aided this success greatly.

Both *Death of Bunny Monroe* and *Waste Land* suffer from the proprietary format issues discussed in chapter one, as both are Apple iPad-only apps. The enhanced book app thus often ties the “book” material to one platform. As publishers try to distort themselves in order to meet one view of reader demand, they bind themselves to certain digital platforms. John Scalzi, author and President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (2010-2013) notes how this creates a new limitation on writing:

Most people who are writers are used to writing stories, novels, or forms where everything is in the text. So if enhanced books become more widespread, that could be tricky. I could make you become more dependent on the platform to tell story rather than just writing it down. That raises lots of questions (Scalzi, quoted in Knapp, 2012, para. 12).

The problem of technological platform dependence is not only that readership becomes limited, but that the industry focus turns toward production, rather than creation. When “what is a book?” changes from a question of the creation of text to one of technological platform, it leads to a number of other issues, such as *authorship*.

Another iPad book app, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (Moonbot Studios, LA, LLC, 2011) is significant because of its very “authorship,” or lack thereof. Based on a book by William Joyce, the app itself is sold *as a book app*, “by Moonbot Studios,” however in actuality it is a game-like, interactive work that is presented as a collectively produced media by the studio. The distinction between the work being “authored” and being “produced” is important here because it brings into question of what a book is and how it is created. This app is a book-like object, but it is

no longer authored, as we would once assume a book text to be. Instead, the “book app” co-opts the text for a studio-style system. The name of the original author, William Joyce, is now diminished as the creator. While the app itself has required further creative input, which should be attributed, the “book” app and its team eclipse the less prominent concept of the book text author. *The Fantastic Flying Books* is significant because it shows how a book app can disenfranchise the author from their textual product.

For authors, the distancing of their name from the product complicates the issue of cross-media ownership by minimising their name as a reader-facing brand. It alters the creative (and ethical) relationship between author and publisher by the “studio” gaining authorial prestige. This raises the question of the potential impact on an author’s incentive to then deal with publishers.

One of my concerns with this research is in how the broader book publishing industry can work together with authors and readers to strengthen their relationship; instead, this change toward making the author-publisher relationship more studio-like would tend to starkly separate authors from their audience. Further, this separation limits the value for authors choosing to work with publishers. A studio-like system promotes the more transitory creative grouping that changes with each product and except for a few “auteurs” like Steven Spielberg, it breaks a continuing creator-producer relationship.

In order to explore how the separation of the author from their audience may affect publishing, it is instructive to look at the Writers Guild of America strike in 2007-08, where the problem of “promotional” activity lying outside the writer’s central job was at issue. The promotional activity was creative material that was used to sell content, but was not considered “content” itself per se. This is not to mention how whole episodes of television might be split into “promotional” “webisodes,” which are then not remunerated in a standard manner, but instead written-off as loss-leading advertising (Banks, 2010, p. 23).

What the Writers Guild argued was that the author-reader relationship, built by “promotional” material, provided value in and of itself, and so writers should have direct payment for these activities. Banks (2010) talks about the “character” of television writers and their impact on the Writer’s Guild strike of 2007:

The technology that was the cause of so much frustration for writers ultimately helped them gain more visibility and recognition, if not compensation, for their

work. In part, because of digital media, many writers' names and faces are now known not just within the industry but also to the general public. With the rise of DVD technology, writers were suddenly made audible through DVD commentaries and podcasts, visible in behind-the-scenes extras, and, in many cases, directly available for commentary, conversation, or comment on websites (p. 25).

What this demonstrates is that the "character" of the writer was actually a kind of value that was then used by the Guild to negotiate, and this sense of value should not be overlooked as an integral aspect of the *authored* product of the "book." By disassociating books from their authors, it is not only the author that may lose out, but the publishers who will also lose a valuable "character" brand.

Conclusion

Book publishers have tried to experiment with new revenue and profit models, as well as how to alter the book form itself to better suit new consumption and distribution styles. Whilst many of these ideas work relatively well, it is particularly important to remember that they bring with them new implications concerning the way readers interact with the book product. Whether the change is in distribution style (in serial, or subscription), revenue streams becoming more directly engaged with readers (in-book advertising), or the alteration of the form itself (premium and enhanced products), the relationship between reader and content changes. Perhaps it is actually *this*, the reader-author / publisher interaction that is at the core of the book publishing experience (on- and off-line). These relationships are examined in the following chapters.

Section Two: Authorship and Audience

Chapter Three: Authorship in “Seed” and “Branch” Texts

This chapter looks at the difficulties and opportunities that arise from the ubiquity of texts in a digital environment. I examine the way in which fan and reader communities interact with authors and their works, and at the market potentials that come from embracing a new reader and writer value model for ebooks. In doing this, I explore how authors and publishers might make use of the many experiences and texts that exist online, instead of distancing themselves from active audiences.

The many different texts online include “seed” texts, influential works (often considered “original” material), and also those other texts that develop as derivative or influenced, yet possibly emergent “branches” of those seeds. A branch text is derivative of another, yet can also grow to be influential in its own right. I use “seed” and “branching” for two reasons: firstly, because “originality” is itself a fallacy that is drawn from the history of authorship and copyright, and secondly, because the terms “seed” and “branch” allow for a focus on shifting, fluid authorship. Seed and branch are terms that can be moved amongst different and related texts—both “original” and “derivative”—as their cultural and attentional influences shift. The publishing industry can then focus on the positive impacts of branches, allowing authors and readers to develop texts and more freely capitalise on textual ecologies.

Due to the complex relationship between seed and branch texts, it is necessary to examine how the textual ecology impacts the balance of power that exists between producers and consumers, and how that relationship can be used for the benefit of all.

While I have addressed many arguments against unauthorised access in earlier chapters, I have not yet discussed the potential *benefits* of the practice. I believe that there are ways in which publishers and authors can work within the digital environment, embracing the unique properties and experiences of ebooks in order to create ebook-only value. The focus needs to be on leveraging existent activities—not only professional work but also the utilisation of previously subversive reader and writer activities now being widely distributed. It is this access relationship, empowered by new online textual

practices, that is the focus of the chapter.

Access and Attention

I argue that freely available authorised downloads can help build valuable attention around a text. Dejean has examined many instances of music and film piracy, and notes that:

If the good [the creative content] supports network effects, its value rises with the installed base of users ... It could be profitable for the supplier to accommodate for a number of illegal copies in order to increase the willingness to pay for originals (Dejean, 2009, p. 327).

While there is a strong argument that increasing awareness through free access should work best for relatively unknown artists (Blackburn, 2006), there is also evidence to show that this same recognition-raising can drive demand for larger artists too.

Bestselling author Paulo Coelho, “has found that he sells more books when they are also available for free, and so actively offers his books without charge through BitTorrent and other services” (Fingleton, Dena & Wilson, 2008, p. 123). For Coelho, these increased sales are “network effects,” where the increased availability of a work causes an increase in *paid* readership.

Coelho’s strategy works because he is providing traditionally published pbooks alongside those free downloads of the same content. However, if we do in fact reach a “tipping point,” where digital “sales” outpace print (as Amazon.co.uk now claims, “Kindle Overtakes Print at Amazon,” 2012), these network effects may be diminished as readers may choose to only access free downloads and not transition to print.

Still, a number of empirical studies suggest a relationship between free downloads and related online sales of both pbooks and ebooks. Hilton and Wiley (2011) measured the sales results of a publisher who placed texts by authors online for free, against comparison texts—both print and digital works—by those same authors. They found that “there was a positive correlation (albeit weak) between book downloads and print sales. [Though] the correlation was stronger when Internet-only sales were considered” (Hilton & Wiley, 2011, “Commercial Implications,” para. 2). This suggests that while we cannot predict the impact of passing a tipping point where most sales are digital, free access to digital texts may still have a positive network effect on the flow of

digital distribution.

Hilton and Wiley's study shows that free access consumers can transition to paid customers, with other examples of positive networks effects making a strong argument *for* more open access (authorised or unauthorised), including film downloaders championing the cinema experience (Belloni, 2009). These works show success with digital distribution, and should comfort those who fear book "piracy" and free access. However, what they particularly speak to is the attention economy. Giving away texts, both of the same title and of similar titles to leverage sales, is about capturing a broad *awareness* of the work, which can then lead to a greater potential range of sales.

Coelho found evidence of this increased attention with the unauthorised translated versions of his own books; the awareness of the free ebooks enlarged his pool of potential p- and ebook buyers. It is also important to note that Coelho had to distribute many of his own works in translation against his own licensing commitments, because he does not actually own those translation rights to legally distribute them (Coelho, 2008). In regards to increasing awareness at the expense of paid distribution, O'Reilly says, "obscurity is a far greater threat to authors and creative artists than piracy" (2002). The idea of increased awareness ties into the concept of the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) as a framework for the thinking about capturing attention around texts; awareness that can then be leveraged for greater sales and used to create new value. The idea is to concentrate on attention rather than on a traditional product because whilst in print control is measured by access to the product itself, in the digital environment unauthorised copying is easy and it is the *scarcity* of attention that makes the more quantifiable metric. Information may be "infinite" but attention isn't, and this makes it a better tool with which to manage a content business (Davenport & Beck, 2001).

This is not to say that unauthorised copying is right or ethical—but it is both currently uncontrollable with technological and cultural means (Hoffmann, 2009; Levy, 2000; Marshall, 2002; Smith and Telang, 2011) and is also a driver for attention-based sales (Makkonen, Halttunen and Frank, 2011). Publishers and authors may feel that the potential loss of sales is threatening, feeling that they are not recompensed by increased attention (or may not need it), but textual "piracy" is not practicable to stop—whether or

not producers wish to engage with attention, increased and unfettered distribution is the new status quo.

It is the attention that Coelho receives that allows him to profit in publishing the work—whether by pbook externality or direct payment for digital copy. What purchasing display and in-store promotional space in a bookstore once achieved—selling the work to potential readers—may now be better gained by broad awareness via digital distribution.

However, these examples still fit with the caveat that online publishing works best when you are selling both pbooks and static ebooks *as if* they are scarce products. Even Hilton and Wiley’s study presupposes a “walled garden” approach, where access is dependent upon publisher permission. The comparison books they measured supposed that consumers would be willing to pay for what was quite literally, economically valueless information in itself regardless of its delivery form. That is, the two options for consumption were pbook or ebook; one prefigured a purchased object, the other a purchase of that same information, *without* the object. Not that digital-only is necessarily an unworkable model—as the evidence suggests (see iBookstore and Amazon: Dediu, 2013; “How Amazon Can Dominate The eBook Market,” 2013), it can and does work—but it does suppose a comparable pbook / ebook experience.

Do purchasers weigh the informational content of an ebook as equal to the artifact of the pbook, and given a digital tipping point, can the industry rely on this to grow? Given the sales prices of bestsellers via sites like Amazon and the Apple iBookstore—driven lower by audience expectation than the equivalent pbook (Hazard Owen, 2012)—the paid-for experience of a pbook and an ebook are not deemed equivalent by consumers. Instead, the current ebook “experience” is in fact merely a delivery style of discrete content packaged conveniently for the purchaser; it does not bring any unique value to the informational product itself. As a direct translation of content from p- to ebook this is fine, but in the digital environment it likely will not be enough to attract the same profits from consumers. However, there are new possibilities of the form to be recognised, instead of only prioritising a digital version of the static and “authoritative” pbook format. To expect a simple wholesale shift from print supported industry to digital supported is unhelpful.

The attention economy appears to invert the traditional economic model of a producer selling something *to* an audience, such that economic transaction now flows the opposite way. This means that a producer must actively “buy” the commodity of the audience’s attention by providing further value to them (Kelly, 2008). This is different to a traditional economic model, in that the producer would have controlled the distribution of their product. Now with digital content being so plentiful, the producer must further “pay” their audience in some way. There is simply so much content that merely offering a text is not enough to stand out. Attention is something to be won from the audience.

Of course, the attention can then be sold on to advertisers, but more so, its real value lies in prompting further user attention. As Doctorow says, readers “evangelize the books they love, form subcultures around them, cite them in political arguments, sometimes they even rearrange their lives and jobs around them” (2006, para. 8). Further, O’Reilly says that “being well-enough known to be pirated [is] a crowning achievement” (2002, para. 7). In many ways, selling copies of a text is actually merely a valuable byproduct of attention.

Attendant to the capturing of attention, the capitalisation of an individual’s attention is troubling because it turns what is traditionally a non-market activity into an economic metric (Terranova, 2000). However, in the Coelho case presented here, existent audience activity—reading—is being “paid” in semi-legitimised access to the text as a kind of grey-market transaction. It is less economic and more a trade of regard, being a recognition of the audience as an important driver for the producer’s career. As I argued earlier, the economic transaction is more a byproduct; the conversation around attention is an ephemeral, social act.

“Attention,” as discussed in this literature, has a monolithic sense to it, as if there were no degree of attention to be paid an object; it is either “on” or “off.” Hayles (2007) uses the terms “deep” and “hyper attention” to describe the manner in which we learn to engage with media. The idea is that the expanse of media lends itself to a disrupted hyper attention; we are aware of the item, but do not truly consider it. However, what these gradients of attention really highlight is that attention, and the textual ecology, is a dynamic relationship between producer and audience. You cannot “win” attention as one does property; rather it is an ongoing discourse.

However the digital texts are distributed, the ability to leverage further sales and economic value comes from promoting attention and audience engagement. “Giving” the central, original text away is not necessarily a danger if there is another, concurrent revenue stream like advertising, or a new kind of ebook experience which is otherwise less replicable and thus able to continue engaging reader attention.

Seed Texts, Branching Texts and Attention

Part of the issue with building attention around a textual ecology has to do with the limitations put upon which texts are considered legitimate to distribute. Traditionally, there are original source texts, and there are derivative works. However, I argue that texts are not only “original” or “derivative,” but are instead *influential* seed texts, or the branches of such a seed; branches which are not only derivative works, but texts which can then earn their own *potential* authorial and cultural influence. These textual sets can include paratextual works—officially created to inform the seed—and also branch para- and metatexts, often created by fan audiences.

The digital environment can potentially offer these secondary texts—previously qualitatively different due to the limited form of their distribution—a more equal footing. The digital environment may now present these seed and branch texts alongside one another in a broad textual ecology—quite different to a pbook environment—and that means a fan branch is more able to build its own seed-like social and textual influences.

The idea of seed and branch texts is used to show how the relationship between what may have once been considered an “original-to-derivative” relationship is actually fluid, rather than static. What this then allows is a reorganisation of professional and fan, allowing fan “derivatives” to be recognised as having their own unique values so that their branches may then build further branches of their own.

Traditional authors and publishers have many avenues outside their central text, with branching paratexts to surround, interpenetrate and influence the seed work. Attention can be harnessed not only via traditional direct advertising paratexts, but also by author blogs, book tours and “blog tours,” where authors visit and guest post on other well-known blogs. Interestingly, these activities that were once necessarily performed

in-person, now create a persistent textual documentation via digital mediation. However, these are all primarily producer-led works (Gray, 2010). For an example of a producer-led paratext look at the recent use of “book trailers” (Johnson, 2010), short videos to introduce readers to an upcoming book. As a publisher / producer-led paratext, these book trailers have fallen into many of the same issues as do enhanced ebooks, each seeking a set of expertise that does not come naturally to a primarily *textual* industry.

However, there is a difference between producer-led and audience-led book trailers, with more and more fans creating book trailers for their favorite books (Kunhardt, 2009). Fans then make a kind of enthusiastic endorsement that sidesteps “quality” by being “unofficial.” Audience-led paratexts and their fan metatexts (such as fan fiction, and broader definitions of derivative work) are both kinds of branching texts owned by fans. Fan texts are important because these texts can help measure success in the attention economy as a metric of usage. That is because these are the sites where audiences’ play out their interest in the seeds, and which provide space to encourage greater audience engagement.

Fan para- and metatexts are important because they create an environment for audience engagement, and thus attention for the seed—without the economic issues that I will soon explore. In addition, the fluidity of seed and branch is important because their use encourages the creation of that engaging material by creating a feedback mechanism for artistic work. Whereas a simple “derivative” text may be popular, it does not lead to anything greater itself. The seed and branch concept, however, explores the perceived attention value of the work. While not bounded solely by book written texts, a great example of the way works can radically shift (even between media forms) via their own attentional niche, is the film *Silence of the Lambs* (Utt, Saxon, Bozman & Demme, 1991). The film is arguably the cultural seed of branch film *Manhunter* (Roth & Mann, 1986)—even though *Manhunter* was both based upon an earlier book and released before *Silence*. *Silence of the Lambs* may have been written as a paratext sequel of the book *Red Dragon* (Harris, 1981, then filmed as *Manhunter*), but the cultural weight rests with *Silence* as the seed. Indeed, the earlier film has since earned cult status, partially due to the cultural weight of its own sequel (Davies, 2001).

While this is film, rather than text, and part of the prominence of the *Silence* film

relates to the specific actors and filmmakers involved in that film, this instance of a branch text feeds back onto all the earlier works (film or book). Seed and branch texts are not only text-based, they are a function of the cultural and attentional awareness of a work.

The official paratext or fan branch metatext—as an amateur work, building on the seed rather than the separate paratexts around it—may build its own set of influences as a non-economic externality (a reward for fan engagement), and that opportunity might help drive the creation of branches—which in turn can build attention around the seed. So the “seed” is not about being the “original” text, rather, “seed” relates to the attentional focus text (though it is likely the original in most cases). Neither is it a linear seed-to-branch relationship, a branch text may in fact begin to influence others as a (new-)seed itself.

Seed and branch texts help to clarify the kinds of texts that can be distributed. While a branch text may gain its own set of influences, and so act as a new-seed—an *influential text* to its own branches, it will always be in a relationship with its own original seed. By viewing fan works as innately branching texts—requiring a relationship with the seed in order for it to be meaningful—the concept describes a more complimentary relationship between authored seeds and fan branches. Indeed, this means a branch text is actually a *derivative* text of the seed, but can also be more than that in cultural terms, including turning full circle, as with *Silence*. While a branch text can potentially accrue attention itself, by being recognised as influenced by the seed it is less threatening to it in an authorial sense. This frees some of the restrictions around the textual ecology, and may pave the way for more attention.

This relationship is important in considering the advantages of a fan branch then effecting back on the seed, however, it need not be so clear a connection. In cases of a work that is transformational and meets the unique requirements of its own niche audience, the relationship can be implicit rather than explicit.

Usage and Value

With attention being at a premium, the issue is how can publishers and authors grow attention to accrue usage and value? In a pbook environment, copies sold were a simple

metric of “success,” but that is now more difficult to gauge in an era of digital distribution. However, there are ways to measure usage as an indication of perceived value. As Wilson says, while discussing the use of academic articles:

This functional dynamic—usage equals value—is a primary feature of the Web environment. It is roughly comparable to reprint requests for hardcopy publications. ... high levels of public usage is a firm signal of value or utility from those providing support for the activity (2001, p. 383-4).

While Wilson is talking about locating advertising, the phrase “usage equals value” can also be applied to further driving *user* attention and usage, thus an overall value of the material. This is because both attention and usage are in a cycle, both contributing to the other and to the overall value of a text.

Unlike producer-led paratexts, “spontaneous” audience engagement is key to usage. It is user-generated material like annotations, fanfiction, etc. that is required, otherwise the material is merely a further part of the seed and displays no usage in and of itself. The material should either be a fan paratext, such as a personalised avatar or reviews, or metatextual material—rather than intrinsically limited producer-mediated material. It must be user-led, because there is a direct correlation between high usage, attention and fan community. Producer-led texts engage less ongoing activity than those driven by and for the fans because seed material is static—it is introduced as-is to the community, whereas fan works show the creation of new material in active usage. This is what Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson found in *Paying for Content or Paying for Community?* (2009) when exploring the usage of Last.FM (a music streaming and social site) and their two-tiered freemium business model. The service offers most of the core services and products for free as initially valuable seed material and then offers further pay services for prestige “items” like visible “subscriber icons” in an ad-free interface. Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson found that:

There is a less obvious yet important effect of virtual socialization that is facilitated by offering UGC [user-generated content] and developing a community on one’s site. We argue that in addition to benefiting other consumers, the act of participation positively affects the experience of the contributing consumer. By contributing content and becoming active in the site’s social community, the consumer is likely to feel more involved with the site. This involvement might lead to increased brand loyalty, which translates into increased willingness to pay (Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2009, p. 4).

The result showed that contributing members were more likely to also be paying

members, which in and of itself supports Wilson's "usage equals value." Of course, the study is looking at music fans, but readers can also build material to demonstrate their participation with books, as with Amazon (www.amazon.com) or Goodreads (www.goodreads.com) book recommendations and reviews. As the article goes on we can see that it is not only the user's individual investment in the site which drives direct payment, but that:

While willingness to pay is, naturally, associated with a higher level of proprietary content consumption, it is also very strongly influenced by the consumer's level of community activity and contribution" (2009, p. 5-6).

The user's contribution not only reflects on them but also builds community around their individual contributor node. Their work helps create a "brand community," characterised by a shared "consciousness of kind, [common] rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 418). By encouraging the spontaneous construction of such a community, the community itself can then create more user-generated content. By encouraging users to display their usage, the value of the aggregate producer- and fan-led content is enlarged.

Ultimately, the beauty of "usage equals value" is that once there is an original product, the attention and usage of it drives its own value by furthering the creation of similar, derivative content. It is a self-sufficient system where value captures the audience's attention and they pay in usage. That usage creates further value, meaning that in some ways, users begin to create the very kind of "premium" content that attracted them in the first place (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009).

What this can mean is two things: firstly, content owners who put their text online, open and supportive to user-led content, can attract further attention and value. Secondly, there is a problem of how to recognise user contributions; it can be difficult to measure the value of usage because all "derivative" texts are considered out-of-scope for economic valuation—they are placed in a flat hierarchy with each other as "unauthorised" derivatives. However, the concept of branch texts can demonstrate active usage of the seed, as each branch is ranked in relation back to the source text. Different branches have different values based on their own level of usage. Recognising the way in which different branch texts relate to the seed allows different levels of seed usage to be measured.

Metatexts and Fan-Fictions

Fan fiction is a branch metatext that fits within an interpretation of the original—relying on the seed to make a complete meaning. Given the concerns over authorship and ownership that come of derivative texts being presented online alongside originals, it is important to look at why these branch texts are created and also at the way in which the fan communities self-regulate their works. It is also interesting to look at how fan fiction can actually *support* the acts of traditional publishing.

A good example of how this support functions is with the unstable relationship that fan fiction has with for-profit enterprise. In general, fan fiction is presented as not-for-profit:

At the heart of this anticommercial requirement of fan works is fans' fear that they will be sued by producers of content for copyright violation. The general understanding is that if no money is exchanged, the copyright owners have no reason to sue because they retain exclusive rights to make money from their property (Hellekson, 2009, p. 114).

There is legal precedence where this is not so simple, with high profile authors such as Anne Rice moving to use the “takedown” provisions of the *Digital Millennium Copyright Act* (DMCA, 1998) to request fan infringement be removed from the Internet (Bartow, 2010). Legal and ethical (mis)use of the law notwithstanding, fans arguing they do not cause economic disturbance may or may not be so clear-cut. Certainly, the arguments by copyright holders are that these works may dilute the value of the brand in a broader sense. Even authors such as J.K. Rowling, who may be open to fan fiction generally, are wary of fan uses which go outside of the “intent” of the original texts. A spokesman for the Christopher Little literary agency (Rowling's agents) was quoted as saying that while Rowling enjoyed fan fiction, “the books ... are still aimed at young children. If young children were to stumble on Harry Potter in an x-rated story, that would be a problem” (Water, 2004, para. 9-10). While such an issue may relate to the author's moral right to control the integrity of their artistic work, in the US at least, these rights are not legally recognised as part of copyright (though some moral rights are covered under separate defamation and unfair competition laws (Cotter, 1997; Kwall, 2010)). However, some moral rights may be considered to be bound to the economic and distributive terms of copyright, as an author may cite delayed economic limitations as

reason to request removal of “competition,” as a proxy to, relating to, and somewhat overlapping with, the unfair competition laws noted above (Rowling acted on this, in another unrelated suit regarding an unauthorised Harry Potter lexicon, Schabach, 2009).

Further, it should be noted that moral rights, such as the right to prevent a work from being altered without permission, to control its ownership or how the work is displayed, and receiving resale royalties, whilst not covered under US copyright law, can certainly be viewed sympathetically as a social concern.

While fans can claim Fair Use in making use of copyrighted material—such as under parody or critique provisions (Stroude, 2010)—I would rather look at the complementary relationship of fan writer and author. I have already argued for fan fiction as an innately branching text, and this idea becomes more important when the legal situation of professional and fan work is considered. While a “derivative” text may supplant the original, “branch” and “seed” offer another viewpoint. Re-branded derivatives often exist because of the legal uncertainties around the works, however, recognising a branch as a legitimately influenced text, trading on that relationship, points to the seed as—at the very least—the locus that the fan work formed around.

Looking at the moral rights of fans to attribution for their creations—openly recognising the creation of a branch text—actually protects the author’s exclusive economic rights by creating a legitimate space for the texts to be engaged with. The space is not equal to copyright, in that it is not policed, however, the very openness of it allows for increased attention on the seed via a more diverse set of potential branches. Not only does this protect fan writers, but it also helps clarify the legality of the textual ecology and the role of attention.

Fan Fiction and Community

It is generally considered that fan fiction is about directly sharing an interpretation of a text with other fans (Jenkins, 1992). This is evident, that as fan fiction is not traditionally published, the only way for it to be read is to find an audience of like-minded enthusiasts. It is the search for fan fiction that then creates a community of interest. The community can only exist by its own member’s interest in divergent, branching metatexts—making them all, by definition, creative readers. Further, the community

builds itself with the sharing of derivative texts, supporting its own growth. This “gifting” of texts situates the fan fiction community as distinctly non-economic:

To give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The tension and negotiation between the three result in fan creation of social relationships that are constructed voluntarily on the basis of a shared interest... Fan communities as they are currently comprised, require exchanges of gifts (Hellekson, 2009, p. 114).

Tellingly, this gift economy is not about financial gain or trade. Gifts are about relationships between both giver and receiver. As Hyde says, “it is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection” (Hyde, 1983, p. 56). Of course that does not totally cut out the opportunity of financial exchange for texts, but it strongly promotes a kind of trust relationship. The giver and receiver of a gift are engaged not in trade, but in community.

The gift exchange helps open out the forms of textual economy, from the fraught economics of textual “commerce” to the value of “community.” In fact, the denial of the utility of commerce is what allows the social value of a gift (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 62-9). Gifts both legally reject, and *must* ethically reject, commercial exchange in order to have communal meaning—paradoxically, the very reason they exist in the first place. The commercial text—existing beyond communal value, but of *communicable* utility—is the location of its own fan practice. So the gift economy works to reiterate the very fandom it comes from—by demonstrating usage, fans create more value to other fans purchasing the original text.

The gift economy is an important lens through which to see fan works, because to commercialise the activity damages its cultural function. This damage is evident in the case of FanLib (Landau, Moonves & Singh, 2007), a clear example of the community rejection of commercialisation. FanLib was a hub site that hoped to take existing fan creators and bring them under one site to drive advertising dollars for FanLib (and to participating producers). In exchange for this, FanLib offered contributors prizes and access to original media creators. Jenkins argues that this destabilised the fan community:

Pull[ing] the production and circulation of fan fiction more fully into the commodity culture: they wanted to monetize on the traffic that fan stories drew to their sites, a step which provoked strong backlash from those most committed

to fandom's gift economy. They showed little grasp of what motivated the activities of the gift economy (Jenkins, 2009a, para. 13).

The problem was that what FanLib saw as an economic opportunity, fan creators viewed as a community. The fans had entered into a creative area to find community and continued to create gifts to support that. By commercialising their activities, FanLib actually threatened the social cohesiveness of the community—it created a different set of possible contributor motivations outside of social membership. Indeed, while researcher Xiaocang Li found that FanLib gained a number of contributors:

Those posting on the site did not feel strong ties to the existing fan community and did not understand their cultural production in terms of “gifts” to fellow fans. These fans did not see a conflict between what motivated their creative expression and the logic of a commodity culture. That said, it was not clear that such fans were as valuable to FanLib or the rights holders because they were less “connected” to the larger fan community, were less likely therefore to draw other fans to the site or to help expand the potential markets for the series being depicted (reported in Jenkins, 2009a, para. 14).

What was interesting, was that not only was the destabilisation of community noted, but so too was the problematisation of splintering the value of community for accruing attention. FanLib's intent to capitalise on fan fiction actually served to limit their site's value.

This is not to say that there have not been, and are not still large projects to support fan writers online, only that *community*, not commodity, tends to organise those collections. These sites are not monetised, and instead try to distance themselves from commercial interests. One, *An Archive of Our Own*, sponsored by the Organisation for Transformative Works (<http://archiveofourown.org/>)—itself a community response to efforts like FanLib (Astolat, 2007)—seeks to be a non-profit centre for hosting fan works of all kinds. While they argue that fan fiction should be considered legally allowable under “Fair Use” provisions, and the group seeks to “reduce the confusion and uncertainty on both fan and pro creators' sides about fair use as it applies to fanworks” (Organisation for Transformative Works, n.d., “Is the OTW Trying to Change the Law?” para. 2), even this may still be considered damaging by some authors and copyright holders. The *Archive* appears to anticipate this, too, as they say:

Some transformative works legitimately circulate in the for-profit marketplace — parodies such as *The Wind Done Gone*... critical analyses that quote extensively from an original, “unauthorized guides,” etc.—that really isn't what fanfic

writers and fan creators in general are doing, or looking to do. We just want to enjoy our hobby and our communities, and to share our creative work (Organisation for Transformative Works, n.d., “Does the OTW Support the Commercialization of Fanfic?” para. 3).

The statement displays their feelings of ambiguity regarding what is allowable in the area. Why not argue that all fan fiction is “transformative” and leave it there? The statement is significant because, while this is a large enterprise that seeks to publicise fan-fiction and develop the community around the metatexts, protecting authors and supporting the laws of copyright, there is still a question around the broader implications of ownership. Simply, the OTW states this because of the ambiguity of *copyright law* itself.

Again, the issue arises from the difference between legitimately “transformative” and underground “fan fiction”—a difference that is practically non-existent but that relies on legally tried and sanctioned approval. By recognising the utility of non-commercial branch texts and their relationship back to the seed, fans gain their space and producers can more ably deploy copyright against directly, commercially infringing works.

Regarding commercial branch works, as long as something still acts as fan fiction, the norms of the gift economy suggest that it is not used for economic, but for *social* value. A branch text could still transition into a commercial “new-seed” text, but in order to successfully achieve that, it would need to begin meeting a niche which the seed text does not—thus tapping into its own new audience, and so develop its own cultural, *authorial* positioning, which can then lead into questions of authority and ownership.

Fan Fiction and Ownership

The ambiguity around fan fiction is further complicated because it is not only about money, but can also be problematic on a creative level too. It is not only the part money plays in the exchange but also the question of textual ownership. To examine this, I will look at the (in)famous Marion Zimmer Bradley / Jean Lamb case.

Bradley, a well-known author in the speculative fiction field, wrote the long-running series *Darkover*. This series was popular amongst fan creators around the late

70s through the 80s and the fan organisation dedicated to the fandom, “Friends of Darkover,” was in fact supported strongly by Bradley herself. In the introduction to the first *Darkover* fan fiction anthology, *Keeper’s Price* (edited by Bradley, 1980), she wrote:

I have always encouraged young writers to write in my world; I think it’s fun. Besides, how else can I get to read *Darkover* stories without going to the trouble of writing them? ... I am awed and humbled at the notion that the very concept of *Darkover* could encourage so many young women, previously inarticulate, to try their voices at creating new characters and new situations in *Darkover* (Bradley, 1980, p. 7-12).

Bradley seemed particularly gleeful in having fans take part in playing “pretend” (1980, p. 14) with her, and certainly did not appear threatened by this kind of play. It is important to note that at the time, science fiction author- and readership still drew upon their pulp fiction backgrounds of creative “sandbox” play, such as the “Lovecraft Circle” of pulp authors, who all quite clearly referenced each other’s contemporary texts (Joshi, 1980). Bradley stated that trying to stop fans putting out work based on a property (like *Sherlock Holmes*) never actually stopped its production, only greatly limited the chance for a wider audience to enjoy it (Bradley, 1980).

However, in a paradoxical intimation of what was to happen regarding the *Darkover* property, Bradley said, in regards to intellectual property issues:

Some critics have been disturbed by the possibility that I might exploit my dying fans, or steal their ideas, or use their work in my future novels.... Of course, I get ideas from my young fans, just as I *give* them ideas. But as for stealing their ideas-I have *quite* enough ideas of my own.... This is why I don’t mind other writers writing about *Darkover*, and at the same time, I have no wish and no need to exploit their ideas. If I ever do make use of a fan’s writing, it will be so altered and transmuted by its trip through my own personal dream-space that even the inventor would never recognize her idea, so alien would it be when I got through with it! (1980, p. 13-14).

In 1992 Bradley wrote to fan writer Jean Lamb, having read her submission *Masks* (1991) for the *Darkover* fanzine *Moon Phases* (edited by Boal, 1991). Given the story was similar to her own work in progress, *Contraband*, Bradley offered Lamb a token payment and a dedication in the eventual book (as recalled by *Moon Phases* editor Nina Boal, 2003). Lamb attempted to negotiate a different deal, but the two were unable to come to an agreement. Consequently, Bradley’s novel *Contraband* was never completed or sought for release by her publishers DAW, due to the publisher’s unease with possible

copyright claims (Bradley, 1992).

As a response to this perceived conflict of interests, Bradley wrote in an article for *Moon Phases* that:

Unfortunately, my decades of encouraging young writers and allowing fans to “play in my yard” just caught up to me. ... I have, however, agreed to refrain from such behavior in the future. From now on, the only *Darkover* material I will read is anthology submissions accompanied by the proper release form. If you publish a *Darkover* fanzine, run an APA etc., do NOT send me copies. They will be returned unread by my office staff (1992, p. 4-5).

This was quite a change from her enthusiastic support for her fans from twelve years before.

The Bradley case (as a study, if not actual legal precedence) is less an issue of copyright law and instead one of ownership of the textual space, of the author’s professional authority. The law is clear that you cannot copyright an idea, only a particular textual expression of one, thus it would have fully covered Bradley’s *Contraband* as a unique text, regardless of similarities of topic to Lamb’s *Masks*. Bradley would also have been covered under section 106(2) of the *Copyright Act* (1976), which states that the “owner of copyright under this title has the exclusive rights to do and to authorize any of the following: ... (2) to prepare derivative works based upon the copyrighted work” (1976). The law would thus have denied Lamb the opportunity of claiming commercial damages for *Masks* (1991), given that she had presented it as already written and not prepared under commission or work for hire. She had already broken Bradley’s right to choose to authorise such a work.

Rather, it seems the real issue of the Bradley-Lamb case relates to one of authorial authority—it was a problem of Bradley appearing to lose control of her work. Legally, there was no danger to the publication of *Contraband*, but as the authority on *Darkover*, Bradley’s status as the author of the canon seed had become threatened. By having such a clear-cut definition between legitimate and illegitimate works, being seen to draw so heavily on fan work actually served to diminish the “unique” nature of her originals, disrupting her privileged authorial position.

Instead, using a concept like seed and branch would allow Bradley to be recognised as the seed author, a position earned by her cultural and authorial capital built amongst her readers. Lamb’s role as a branch writer could then have brought her text

legitimacy—as it was highly regarded by the seed author—rather than bring Bradley down. Seed and branch does not necessarily remove copyright on a whole, but it does allow a more permissive way to look at textual relationships; a branch text need not be considered authoritatively, or potentially economically, threatening.

There are still *Darkover* novels being published—at least as of 2010 (Bradley & Ross, 2010), eleven years after Bradley’s death in 1999. The use of co-authors has since brought unsubstantiated claims of her utilising fan fiction in order to groom potential ghostwriters. In the original Lamb case, the fan was uncertain of just how much, or how little, of her creative work was going to be used by Bradley:

I was unable to determine how much of the novel I wrote was going to be used. The offer consisted of a few hundred dollars and a mention in a dedication, in exchange for my signing an agreement not to sue for copyright infringement. This seemed a bit open-ended, and I consulted with my agent...he didn’t think much of it, given that my agreement not to sue did not mention how much or how little of the book was going to be used (Lamb quoted by Coker, 2011, “The *Contraband* Incident,” para. 3).

Lamb expressed uncertainty over her work being used by a recognised author without proper attribution. Even given the legal standpoint, both sides make quite relevant arguments. From a published author’s point of view, an unauthorised “fan” infringed not only upon her intellectual property, but also on the bounds of her authorial reputation. From the fan’s point of view, there is a fear of her interests being invisible to the broader readership.

The sense of being “invisible” taps into fan concerns over their work being taken advantage of. Andrejevic, in his article “Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans” (2007), discusses the taking advantage of fan labour via “crowdsourcing.” He looks at the site *Television Without Pity* (<http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/>) where both paid and *unpaid* fans critique and annotate television shows. Fans often take this role quite seriously, both personally—as a motivator for personal growth and *social* engagement with popular texts—and also in a semi-professional manner:

The promise of virtual participation in the production process, in short, invites viewers to adopt the standpoint of producers, and thereby facilitates the conversion of viewer feedback into potentially productive marketing and demographic information (2007, p. 5).

Andrejevic cites Terranova (2000) as defining this usage of fan “participation” for commercial reasons as “free labor,” characteristic of the online economy and “the social factory” (2000, p. 33). This means that new, attention-grabbing values are coming not from traditional producers but from fans—fans that are not necessarily being recognised as contributors by their own communities, nor as officially recognised contributors.

Andrejevic continues his critique of free labour, saying that:

The invisibility of free labor in the “social factory”—the fact that an increasing variety of activities double as value-generating labor thanks to the information-gathering capacity of interactive media—echoes the invisibility of forms of “female domestic drudgery” that are functional to capital “which profited by avoiding the full costs of recreating the successive generations of the labor force” (2007, p. 42).

Producers regard fan culture and its myriad values of usage and attention explicitly outside economic worth, because so far it has been difficult to measure. Rather, fans may create for social reasons, but content owners do not consider how those fan branches then feed back into the broader textual engagement. There should be recognition of this work by producers, not least, because if it is forgotten, then the “iceberg” beneath the work of “traditional” productivity will be invisible and more difficult to better manage in the future after a primary move to digital distribution. Still, this diminishes the very complex nature of value, falling into the same trap the Andrejevic article is critiquing, by viewing non-paid labour as “un-valued.” However, fan community usage shows that there is a great deal of value exchange happening amongst their free labour, with gifting serving to build social cohesion; fan participations can be recognised as value via social contribution. Andrejevic already says that “many TWoPpers suggest that the effort that they put into the shows they watch increases their own viewing pleasure” (p. 8) and that “the show itself can in some cases become merely a precursor to the real entertainment, which takes the form of its online comeuppance” (p. 9). What this allows is for cultural value to be shared as social capital (Putnam, 2000). As with ebook sales versus attention, the utilitarian economics of the media texts are themselves just a byproduct of the emergent value of fan culture.

Fan work has hitherto been valued quite differently, as an insular commodity of “fandom,” traded within the fan sub-culture but not outside of it. However, given its new digital distribution, producers can now commodify active usage as an adjunct to its

freely distributed nature. While Andrejevic argues this is a new form of taking advantage of workers, I argue that though it is biased against fans monetarily, that money has never flowed toward them at all. Traditionally, fans have been those who have *paid* for access to content. However, there are other kinds of value that come from communicating fan critique and readership. A value that fans can add to the seed text, as a very new *empowerment* of the audience. While cultural capital, as the measure of social interaction describing intra-fan power relationships is significant in offline communities (Bourdieu, 1985), it is social capital that is most important here. This is the idea that a social network has its own value relating to social engagement—the performativity of fan memberships in their own community, which can then lead to greater usage. The social network is definitely of interest to the network owners, not *as* economic value itself, but because autonomous fan activity informs the attention economy model of trading for values built on its own more ephemeral method of sharing. By recognising audience participation and social engagement, fan communities can be legitimised by producers via their acceptance into the broader textual ecology. This recognition rewards and encourages fan usage with greater social capital and thus drives the attention value of authors and publishers.

Recognising fan value solves many issues around textual ownership, helping to articulate the manner in which fan works do not damage the seed, but further it. The recognition of fans also situates them, not as victimised, but empowered. However, it does not fully answer the problems of authorial authority—how can an author like Bradley retain their socially privileged authorial position when fans interrupt traditional publication by having their texts in-line with the seed?

Authorship and the Role of the Writer

Part of the problem with the broader uptake of content, and so the development of a broad textual ecology along with the attention it accrues, is with the confluence and confusion of key terms and roles. There continue to be legal and ethical questions regarding who controls “whole” works. With the prevalence of digital texts, both official seed and fan branches, quite who can claim authority over a set of texts is confused, and so this further curtails the scope of content that is “allowed.”

New Media tends to have a number of terms for the roles of “authors” and “fans,” such as the portmanteaus of “conducer” (Reuveni, 2007) and “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Reuveni writes about the case of players creating as a part of virtual world games (MMORGs), and that the creation of virtual objects and intellectual property in these games perform a significant part in building the game’s economic value. Reuveni says, “players will create more if given some control over their creativity. That is, developers and players alike benefit when players retain some copyrights in the game” (2007, p. 1854). The issue comes when the Conducer is finally granted direct financial rights to the use of their intellectual property by the game owner, and “under the logic of ‘joint works’ as defined by the *Copyright Act* (1976), either party can exercise any of the rights granted the copyright owner, subject to an accounting to the other authors” (2007, p. 1850). The problem as I see it is two-fold: by monetising the user / conducer’s contributions on an ad hoc basis (as and when new pieces of IP are brought onboard a project) this revisits Bradley’s problem of quantifying the level of contribution (Lamb case, Coker, 2011). It also works as a *disincentive* to fans in a gift economy, by commodifying their internal, metatextual relationships.

The prosumer theory (Toffler, 1980) also positions contributing actors as co-owners, and actually further teases out the issue of unpaid labour being made use of for otherwise corporate products. Again, the issues of visibility and *attribution* are being conflated with the economics of copyright—while economic recognition is a significant issue, the sharing of profit with fans is stumbling block for many producers. Instead of defining a monetary share, however, perhaps fan contributor visibility could be defined by sharing attribution. What I wish to bring out is the *creator* of a discrete piece of text, rather than conducer or prosumer; those roles focus on the economic distribution of rights, whereas it is the sense of involute creative attribution I seek.

Attribution relates directly to the social capital of a contributor. Fans seek to prove their engagement with the text—in both authorised (solicited) and casual (unsolicited) ways in order to build relationships amongst their peers. Banks and Humphreys’ (2008) exploration of the “co-creator” works well with the idea of the “social economy,” the value which users gain via participation. However, Banks and

Humphreys are mainly drawing from computer gaming and suggest a strong power discrepancy between games “professionals” and “amateurs.” In the book publishing industry, one of the problems is in the uncertainty of the distinction between professional and amateur, because the means of textual production are so much more readily available than game design. Fan writers seek to prove their engagement with authors—thus gaining social capital—often at times in-line with the “original” seed text. Authors and owners desire simplified ownership, distinct from the “amateur,” in order to maintain their economic and authorial standing. Both groups seek to achieve these aims through the same textual form.

What I wish to look at is the question of what is an author? Not in a literary theory sense, but in a legal sense. The reason for this is that by defining the authorial role, a space may be created for contributors, which both recognises their work without then impinging upon the cultural position of the author. It is important to note that “writer” and “author” are distinct roles, and it is Barthes who makes a distinction between the two. He says, “the author performs a function, the writer an activity” (Barthes, 1972, p. 186). It is the author’s responsibility to:

Support literature as a failed commitment... [that] permits society—or Society—to distance the work’s content when it risks becoming an embarrassment... to neutralize the revolt of [their] passion, the subversion of criticism (which forces the “committed” author into an incessant and impotent Provocation) — in short, to recuperate the author: every author is eventually digested by the literacy institution ... The author’s language is a merchandise offered through traditional channels, it is the unique object of an institution created only for literature (1972, p. 189-90).

The author is a figurehead of the literary product, whereas the:

Writer’s function is to say at once and on every occasion what he thinks [emphasis mine]; and this function suffices, he thinks, to justify him; whence the critical, urgent aspect of the writer’s language: it always seems to indicate a conflict between thought’s irrepressible character and the inertia of a society reluctant to consume a merchandise which no specific institution normalizes (1972, p. 191).

A writer is someone who views the act of writing as one of identity, whereas an author’s work is the *institutionally* published product. One can be self-identified, whereas the other must be negotiated to be legitimate. However, the Internet looks to eventually lead to the situation that Barthes anticipates, where we can perhaps all become considered

“transitive writers.”

I believe that this author / writer distinction can actually help solve many of the issues surrounding the author’s loss of control and authority—the anxiety that comes from a communicative para- and metatextual online publication. Jaszi argues that the author as an institutional role has always been used as a signifier of copyright:

“Authorship” has remained what it was in eighteenth-century England—a stalking horse for economic interests that were (as a tactical matter) better concealed than revealed, and a convenient generative metaphor for legal structures that facilitated the emergence of new modes of production for literary and artistic works (Jaszi, 1994, p. 500-1).

Martha Woodmansee calls it the “economic and legal conditions of the emergence of the [category] ‘author’” (1984, p. 425). However, in order to convince society of the right of authorship it has been conflated with “originality.” Woodmansee examines its origins in the 17th Century:

[Edward] Young preached originality in place of the reigning emphasis on the mastery of rules extrapolated from classical literature, and he located the source of this essential quality in the poet’s own genius. ... a writer’s ownership of his work the necessary, and even sufficient condition for earning the honorific title of “author,” and he makes such ownership contingent upon a work’s originality... Young’s ideas answered the pressing need of writers in Germany to establish ownership of the products of their labor, so as to justify legal recognition of that ownership in the form of copyright law (1984, p. 430).

One could thus argue that there is a false—though strong—entanglement between publishing rights, artistic merit and creative ownership. The problem is there is no real scope for a right of “authorship” which is not founded upon a mediated stake of responsibility, coupled with an economic benefit. Authorship is a cultural responsibility and privilege given to those who play the game. This is obviously going to prove to be an issue for the traditionally published, professional author such as Bradley, whose livelihood is caught up in proving the originality of their work.

As the history of a defensible “work” has accrued (alongside Barthes’ concept of authorial responsibility), so too has copyright grown to create a legal framework for authorship. In fact, copyright now gives us a clearer way to define the “author”:

The maturation of the “work” as a legal concept [which] increased the leverage of publishers and other purchasers of “authors” rights. Once the penumbral concept of the “work” was firmly in place, the purchasers could acquire a general

dominion over the imaginative territory of a particular literary or artistic production. Publishers could use this “authority” to exclude from that territory not only strangers but the very “author” who first delimited it (Jaszi, 1991, p. 478).

The legal role of authorship has become further removed from the concept of “originality,” and rather has become a transferrable right based upon publishing. Nowhere is this more directly observable than in works made for hire. What this means, is that the legal right of authorship cannot be destabilised, because it is actually more a “property” than an identity—such as that a fan could socially perform.

The agreement around authorship makes it a liminal definition—there is no difference between “author” and Barthes’ “transitive writer,” at least in online distribution, other than the contract of ownership. As such, perhaps it is better to use the term “writer” for a broader sense of moral attribution and “vision,” separately to that of the author. The term writer has a level of *creative* inviolability, only responsible for his or her own utterance—down to the level of each and every phrase, to the exclusion of the published and communicated authored whole. The writer irrevocably owns their specific phraseology, whereas the author is responsible for the whole work, whether or not there have been contributions they are not uniquely the source of. Thus the writer can better be linked to the attribution of moral rights, instead of to the economic issues stated. Again, Barthes says:

Writer’s function is to say at once and on every occasion what he thinks [emphasis mine] ... [indicating] a conflict between thought’s irrepressible character and the inertia of a society reluctant to consume a merchandise which no specific institution normalizes (Barthes, 1972, p. 191).

This means that an artistic work can have many contributing “writers”—each only responsible for their utterance—whereas the work may be agreed to have only one “author” who normalises the whole.

The broad usage of “author” in discussions around ownership is confusing then, given the tight relationship between the transferable, negotiable economic rights of the author, and those of *attribution* which are inviolate. Surely the specific text of a contributing writer should be attributable to *them*, though another can accept responsibility and economic privilege to *author* the whole work? While rather difficult

to disentangle from copyright authorship in print—due to much more limited distribution opportunities making it impractical to list all variations—with digital text, a finer gradation of attribution is possible. Electronic metadata should (if used properly) allow for attribution at a textually atomic level; attribution of the artistic “vision” which comes of word-by-word construction. While the authorship of a text could be consensually taken on by one name, contributions not intentionally agreed upon as joint-authorship (as in the *Copyright Act 1976*, § 101) can still be attributed to further individuals *without* impinging upon the economic rights of the functional author. This allows the particular contributions to be recognised as a singular instance of creativity—published (as per the Internet), but not necessarily *authored* institutionally. For example, McKenzie Wark, who blogged his book *Gamer Theory* (2007b), accepted reader comments into the final text. Wark would, in this case, still be the author of the whole, whilst the specific comments could be fully attributed to their writers.

The specific instance of text then reflects the claim of a personal *writing* of the text—made without negotiation with the institution of literature; or the *authorial* requirement. It should also include the disclaimer of any change to the particular text: the attribution must contain the sequential whole of what is, essentially, a *quote*. Like any authorial agreement, this legality could be negotiated, allowing for a contributor to take on an authorial role, or to reject it.

However, does the issue of contribution, and especially editorial contribution, being accepted into the work destabilise the notion of attribution to a whole artistic work? I would argue not.

The contribution of editorial is generally outside both the legal, and generative attribution of “romantic authorship.” By this, I mean Young’s view of the “original” creator-author in the garret (Woodmansee, 1984, p. 425)—though the specifics of credit given tend to be mediated by the professional mores of the responsible author (Volkh, 2006). Importantly, the agreed contract of authorship may opt to include any other contributor (editorial or consultant), or indeed, as per the “Work for Hire” doctrine, exclude the original *writer* for any other author. The ethical standpoint of the editor rests with two basic questions that drive the editorial process: “is the author saying what he or she wants to say? [And,] is the author saying it as clearly and consistently as possible?”

(Williams, 1994, p. 3, 6).

The definition of “author” tends not to be as obvious as it is if considered in a romantic sense. Instead, it is a negotiated term, and must be one where the titular individual may take or reject modification of the text before accepting responsibility for it. This is not applicable in areas where the contributor does not have professional or legal control of the outcome of the developing text—as the case would be for an ethical editor, who is *employed* to provide a service for hire. What does arise between author and contributors, however, are moral rights, or the French *droit d’auteur*. The reason this is useful to look at is that moral rights are inalienable (at least in the French and European traditions), continuing *regardless* of the transfer of copyrightable economic rights. Given the textual nature of “writership,” any textual contribution is intrinsically owned by the writer of the textual string. Thus “authorship” cannot be wrested from an individual because it is a role that is accepted by contract and negotiation—and *authority* over the work; power to legitimise contributing text as “authored,” like that for Bradley, is retained, while writers like Lamb retain moral claim to their specific contributions.

Authorship, Writership and Copyright

As an example of the relationship between the two roles of author and writer, I look at the relationship between author Raymond Carver, his editor Gordon Lish and the recent issue regarding re-publishing of Carver’s original texts (here specifically for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver, 1981). The case explores the way that a whole work can be recognised and broken down by *writerly* textual contributions. While theirs was a friendship, the author / editor relationship was somewhat fraught, with Lish claiming that “he played a crucial role in the creation of the early short stories” (Max, 1998, para. 1). In fact, on looking at the original Carver manuscripts versus Lish’s “edits” of the book, it is clear that Lish had altered over half the original number of words and changed more than half of Carver’s intended endings, quite clearly altering the “rhetorical atmosphere of many of the stories” (attributed to Max, 1998, quoted in Weldon, 2009, p. 534).

It is an interesting case—albeit unusual—because their relationship demonstrates how the copyright and authority of the author is clearly defined, whilst the writer’s

contribution can still remain inviolate. “Inviolable” is important to this concept of a writer’s contribution because it is, by definition, a non-negotiated position.

Ethically speaking, Lish had overstepped the bounds of the editor’s position, but while the meddling sat badly with Carver (see McGrath, 2007), the text was published with Lish’s editing. Subsequently, however, Carver took more control of his authorial position and Lish dropped his role of editor (Max, 1998). More recently still, Carver’s widow, Tess Gallagher, wished to publish those original stories (Rich, 2007), against the will of original publisher and license holder, Alfred A. Knopf (Weldon, 2009). According to general understanding of copyright law, Gallagher and Carver’s estate would simply be blocked from publishing versions of his work from *What We Talk About*, because whilst still ultimately owning the material, any re-publication would then infringe on Knopf’s licensed rights. However, in this particular case the estate does have some claim for re-publication under the Fair Use provision, due to the very “abuses” to Carver’s moral rights that Lish made. Weldon specifically talks about the instance Gallagher could make of Fair Use to publish the originals in the “spirit of comment or criticism... [though] such a publication would have to be carefully created in order not to supersede or devalue the Knopf version” (2009, p. 569). This would constitute Fair use because:

[The] U.S. Has not formally codified moral rights portions of the Berne Convention and does not have a particularly robust or useful array of “equivalents,” fair use works to remedy these short-comings involving the protection of an author’s creative personality and voice. In such a context as the Carver “originals,” then, moral rights and fair use doctrine can work symbiotically (Weldon, 2009, p. 570).

Under a moral rights system, however, this case could work out very differently.

Under a moral rights system, Carver’s authorial agreement has actually been made via a radically transformative editor, leaving his own creative personality and vision for the text behind. Of course, the US does not directly recognise moral rights, but there are numerous legal precedents that confuse the situation and hint at what “could be.” In fact, given its fraught nature in the US, types of moral rights are highlighted in the specific laws and cases that debate it. In this case we could question whether *What We Talk About* has been “passed off,” or is falsely representative of Carver’s vision in

violation of Section 43(a) of the Lanham Act (2006). This offers to “protect the public and the artist from misrepresentations of the artist’s contribution to a finished work” (Follett v. New American Library, Inc., 1980). Though the *Follett v. New American Library* case relates to an editor being given sole authorship over a text regardless of only minor changes, the potential that Carver’s authorial name could have been taken in vain is conceivable (though problematic for all involved). Note, while the Lanham Act is considered to be for use on trademarks, not copyright, as can be seen in this *Follett* case, an author’s name can meet a tradable level of recognition in an audience’s mind—thus the Act coming into play.

Carver could then still be considered the transitive writer and *owner* of the original, un-edited material and texts—having agreed to the economic rights transfer of only transformed versions. His estate could now be free to release *those* with Carver as the *writer* of his originals, splitting-off into a newly authored text whilst still leaving the “original” Knopf-published edition under his agreed authorial name.

It is an interesting case because there are two “writers” here: Lish who, perhaps ethically, should not have exerted his influence, and Carver himself with his own “preferred texts.” What this shows is that the *legal* ownership of the text rests with the communicating author, while we could argue that the ethical, moral rights rest with the writer. While not having been raised by Lish (or his estate) in this case, the implied statement of the Carver estate—which must claim significant, intentional intervention by the editor—suggests that the originally published texts *authored* by Carver were in fact *co-written* by Lish. It is this (unspoken) admission that would then allow Carver’s estate to take authorial / publishing rights to the un-edited originals away to another company. Under a “writer’s” *droit d’auteur*, his name has been taken advantage of for texts which are not “his,” but Lish’s. Lish does not have any authorial rights in this instance (and his moral rights are actually curtailed by the ethical constraints of editorial interference), rather, those authorial rights were exclusive to Carver, as Lish would have been governed by work for hire status.

The fact of the matter is that this is still a very unusual case, with such highly publicised interference of a writer’s text, complicating associated authorship being rare.

Also, Carver's estate may find it difficult to prove that his agreement to the changes were against his personal, creative vision. Carver did note, however, before publication, "if the book were to be published as it is in its present form [as edited], I may never write another story, that's how closely, God Forbid, some of these stories are to my sense of regaining my health and mental well-being" (McGrath, 2007, para. 8). That the stories were published as edited suggests a certain level of coercion went on between this letter and eventual publication.

What this case suggests is that there is a distinct difference between the *right* to attribution of writership and the legal *agreement* of authorship. The case indicates a writer's right to contribute and be recognised, whilst protecting the authorial and publisher's economic rights. What the definitions of "writing" and "authoring" allow for are that while many may write atomic sections of a text, the legal (and economic) authorship may be agreed upon before hand. Separating out these two roles allows for legal and economic protection, without necessitating the suppression or overlooking of previously marginalised contributing voices.

The terms writer and author, as explored here, allow both fan para- and metatexts, whether published in-line with a producer-led and *authored* paratext or not, to be *written* as contribution and so retain moral right to that attribution. That is important because it gives a recognised space for fan contributors to act out their engagement with a seed by freely creating branch texts. That lets fans build social capital, whilst authors and owners are able to accrue attention around their seed without fear of economic or authorial disturbance.

Authors as copyright holders of an existing property control the right to the creation of derivative works under statutory provision 17 USC § 103(a), which states that "protection for a work employing pre-existing material in which copyright subsists does not extend to any part of the work in which such material has been used unlawfully" (*Copyright Act 1976*). However, under 17 USC § 103(b) of the same *Act*, the writer of material created legally as a derivative—whether by Fair Use, or under commission (but *not* as work for hire, where ownership is legally transferred)—retains copyright to their own elements. While somewhat limited to Fair Use and commissions,

this is useful to note, because this shows that writers of branch texts do have rights, further than their moral rights of attribution. However, these rights are explicitly separated from the ownership of the *authored* whole, resting in the particular textual contributions themselves. In teasing out the concept of “author” and “writer” we are able to codify what it means to act in these roles, clarifying those roles for publishers and authors.

The quantification of roles can also allow for a gifting-back from copyright holders, for writers to be able to take their singular contribution away to do whatever they wish with it, and to *cite* their inclusion in the published and authored para- / metatext. However, it brings no other right of claim to other writer’s texts or to the authored text as a whole.

Further, recognising the writer’s role can support authorial authority. Regarding Bradley and Lamb, giving the fan “writer” that status both legitimises, and *limits* her role—the writer simply does not have the institutional positioning of an author, nor their cultural cachet. Bradley could have retained institutional and professional authority—as the organising principle of the work; the sole figure who may receive contribution into the whole work—while embracing branch material. The predicament Bradley had found herself in was that without this distinction of roles she was subject to a fan claiming to have been “ripped off,” and thus demanding to be included as an *authorial* contributor. I argue that it was this demand that served to disrupt the publishing of *Darkover* material, more than the existence of similar written content. With the writer / author distinction, Lamb could have had almost full attribution as contributing writer, but Bradley continue to be the sole author (the owner of the property). The published seed could accrue usage, and the writer becomes transitional as a communicative role, not an economic one. Neither is the role contractual, rather, the writer’s role is one that exists outside of the transactional exchange of the institution, remaining inviolate. This means the writer does not explicitly enter into a contract for contribution, but is covered by overarching law—law that could then be waived by authorial agreement for compensation other than attribution; there would be no “writer for hire,” only “author for hire” terms.

Conclusion

New digital distribution options provoke problems between authors, publishers and audiences by blurring the traditional relationship between them all. This chapter has sought to outline a conceptual framework for authors and publishers to deal with the concerns and opportunities of fan para- and metatexts as they branch from the central seed. Copyright, as it is generally understood and used, complicates the relationship between audiences and the producers of seed content. The complication constricts the attentional value that comes of both social capital and ecological externality that branching para-and metatexts can bring to the broader whole. Instead, by looking beyond legal definitions and looking at how the roles played by “author” and “writer” are distinct, I suggest that issues of ownership and value can be clarified.

Chapter Four: Commercial Interests in Writer and Reader

Performativity

The previous chapters have focused on the dominant constraints of both business and social mores regarding ownership and creatorship. I have explored how the book publishing industry seeks to wrest the utility and usability of the ebook form from their audiences, in order to maintain financial and creative control of the product. It has been argued throughout this exegesis, however, that these constraints have worked to curtail the author and publisher's *own* control of their product. Both publishers and authors lose control by off-loading much of their power to technological distributors, and / or by pushing their creative audiences away due to copyright concerns. Instead, by opening their materials to many distributors without "piracy" protections, and by acknowledging the role that active audiences—as *writers*—may have in producing branch texts, publishers and authors may benefit from both gift economies and the attention economy. Together with the drives of actively engaged fans, both producers and audiences can work together to build successful works.

While earlier chapters sought to argue that fans were not a financial threat, this chapter considers whether there is a space for branch texts that do seek commercial gain. Can those commercialised branch texts then actually provide opportunities for seed publishers and authors? Not all writers of branch texts seek to commercialise their texts, of course, but where do those works stand, which straddle the line between branch and independent seed text? Works that seek to grow via increased audience attention toward their own independent seed, and become professionally *authored* material. These "new-seed" texts may be, or become, more than fan fictions—in that they earn readerships with commercial potential. New-seed works are specifically those branch texts which have built their own unique audience, transforming their writer into a recognised *author* of that work—more than a branch writer, they now accrue attention of their own, separate to the instigating seed.

Commercial use of derivative works is a fraught issue, however, particularly given the current culture of remixing and participation headlined by Creative Commons

(henceforth CC). Particularly because the CC licence selected often uses a non-commercial clause (–NC when discussing CC), suggesting that monetary gain would prevent further communal usage—I argue otherwise, that “commercial use” and “harm” must be understood as actionable terms, only relevant given specific author circumstances. As such, CC, both –NC and broader variants, can also be understood as kinds of content control mechanisms, bringing their own stresses on the textual ecology of seeds and branch works.

The chapter examines whether a derivative text that meets a niche audience, unmet by the seed author, can in fact serve to heighten the textual and commercial values of both works. Alternatives to copyright and CC are explored to suggest methods to decrease impediments to both non- / commercial branch texts, in order to aid in the construction of a broad textual ecology which can help all texts to accrue attention.

Commercial Branch Texts

A recent example of a fan work moving to a professional text is *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011). It began as *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) fan fiction (Deahl, 2012), then gained enough of an Internet following that it was rewritten to eliminate the copyrighted elements and published professionally by the Writer’s Coffee Shop. Significantly, this initial publication by a small publisher led to even greater awareness and a further re-publication by mainstream publisher Little, Brown. From the perspective of basic copyright law this would seem to make *Fifty Shades of Grey* unlawful, as an unauthorised derivative of Meyer’s original. Not surprisingly, Writer’s Coffee Shop CEO Hayward has said that the novel bears “very little resemblance to *Twilight*, ... only the character’s names were borrowed, the setting, plot, abilities, relationship structure, feel and focus of the story were original” (Deahl, 2012, para. 3)—further, even those names were subsequently altered. As noted in chapter three, copyright law does allow for specific instances of material in a derivative text to remain the property of the new writer; where the derivative text draws from, but remains distinct from, the original (*Copyright Act 1976*, 17 USC § 103(b)). An *unauthorised* derivative work (billing itself such as “*Twilight 2*”) falls into another area (103(a) of the same *Act*), where the act of creating the new work is *itself* against the law. That means by writing an unauthorised

derivative of an original work, the writer forfeits ownership of even their own unique material, in violation of the parent clause. James has then chosen to distance *Fifty Shades* from *Twilight*.

There is certainly an argument that Fair Use would allow James to claim her whole derivative text as lawful, perhaps as a transformative work or parody. The new material would then be protected under copyright (1976, 17 USC § 103(b))—as her publisher avows. However, if she traded on this, given straight copyright law, an unauthorised “derivative” text is considered in competition with the original. However, why must the two texts exist at odds with each other—why can they not be allowed to inform one another? *Twilight* author Stephanie Meyer herself has said of James, “good on her — she’s doing well. That’s great!” Regarding its origin in fan fiction, Meyer comments, “it might not exist in the exact form that it’s in... [but James] had a story in her, and so it would’ve come out in some other way” (Prinzivalli, 2012, para. 3 and 5). As a Mormon, it is unlikely that Meyer would have written the particulars of the derivative herself—*Twilight* being more “abstinence porn” (Seifert, 2008), or at least under influence of the Mormon faith (Aleiss, 2010), compared to James’ own mild BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Sadomasochism and Masochism) novel, she has not and will not even read it (Cochrane, 2013). The unlikely nature of *Fifty Shades* as a derivative of *Twilight* might inform that copyright infringement was not pursued, however, it may also illustrate how beneficial such weak ties between seed and branch texts can be.

While it is public knowledge that the work began as *Twilight* fan fiction, titled *Master of the Universe* (Boog, 2012c), it seems this direct connection must be denied by James and her publishers. The book contains this disclaimer on its copyright page:

The author published an earlier serialized version of this story online with different characters as “Master of the Universe” under the pseudonym Snowqueen Icedragon (James, 2011).

With evidence of the work’s origins removed from the Web (Boog, 2012c), this legal release both suggests that it has been written under Fair Use, whilst simultaneously being published and distributed under a denial of its *Twilight* relationship. It attempts to dodge claims of being an unauthorised derivative (Fair Use), and also any copyright infringement (denial). This is because copyright law creates a fixed line around

“original” works and any subsequently influenced, derivative texts regardless of merit or audience attention. Given the terminology of “seed” and “branch” texts, however, a branch that attains sufficient cultural and authorial capital could be considered to have become its own, new-seed text. Perhaps it would have been advantageous for both Meyers and James to have the relationship between texts clearly acknowledged and recognised? Though the positive effects of recognition should come with the caveat that Meyer, as author, may have had a personally negative opinion of fan derivative works.

In commercial terms neither series actually impinges upon the audience niche of the other—with Meyer unlikely to have ever actioned such a work, and James’ inspired by *Twilight*, thus referencing back to Meyer’s text, situating *Fifty Shades* as owing to *Twilight*. The acknowledgement of a seed work’s branch text growing out into its own new-seed could create synergies between the two rather than conflict. Between *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* there has been a lengthened awareness of *Twilight* as a text itself, with *Fifty Shades* not having detracted from *Twilight*, but on the contrary given it added publicity and attention. Indeed, it would be fascinating for further analysis to be made on how *Fifty Shades* may have caused a sales spike in *Twilight* consumption, whether its publication may have acted in a similar way as a sequel may have affected audience attention spans.

Importantly, this relationship is situational, something that a new-seed may trade upon, without necessarily being defined by—just as *Twilight* is not necessarily, popularly understood as the “seed” of *Fifty Shades*.

Copyright law defines whether something is “lawful” or not, and thus constrains further derivative texts growing from any original—quite at odds with the law’s stated premise of promoting the creation of new works (US *Copyright Act 1976*, § 8). Copyright has enshrined a sense of rights to the author, at the expense of creative (and even *financial*) growth (Rob & Waldfogel, 2004; Andersen, 2010; Condry, 2010), growth that need not have come from the original author, but may also come from audience members and writers. *Fifty Shades of Grey* does indeed show how grey the area is, but the apparent need to circumvent its own history demonstrates that the law is neither fair nor optimal. Instead, why not embrace these awkward, derivate branches? It could help further awareness of the seed, *but it can also* show how meeting a niche that

had not been served by the original does not necessarily harm the seed text itself (Bohannon, 2007; Bohannon, 2010). Note that this shows the fluidity of the seed-to-branch concept, as a branch text can become an authored seed text as it grows its own community around it, which could then further *inform* the original text and its audience without diminishing it. The seed and branch model is not zero-sum, but generative.

Another example of this function of derivative branch becoming a niche new-seed of its own is *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen & Grahame-Smith, 2009). Owning this metatextual work is not equal to owning the original *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 2002), however, it has grown from the original and so speaks back to it. While a different point of law (the original being public domain due to the expiry of its copyright term), as a direct relation it would be interesting to see statistics of the transfer of *Zombies* readers to owners of both works. Once again, these two works meet different niche audiences, building audience attention to create potential synchronicity for both.

I argue that the seed-to-branch concept works around continually extending copyright terms, in order to take help build textual ecology via diverse branch derivatives. Instead of relying on legal constraints, such a system could instead positively reinforce audience engagement, and build a larger user base by forming more complex relationships between readers, writers and authors of diverse texts.

Copyright and Creative Commons

Fifty Shades of Grey and *Twilight* demonstrate how community can be built around a branch to make it a new-seed via accrued authorial capital. The new-seed builds from a branch work via its own attention accrual, into a uniquely socially significant seed—able to exist as a text, extrinsic to its original seed—in its own right. However, the case regarding *Fifty Shades*' transition from fan fiction to uniquely published book, also demonstrates that the relationship between seed and new-seed is legally fraught.

Currently copyright privileges the rights of first-creator ownership, even when, like *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, those rights may be at odds with broader commercial and attention values for both original and derivative texts. Lemley (2012), while discussing market regulation of intellectual property laws, says:

A regulatory regime that requires permission to enter the market or develop a new product is a problem for innovation because it relies on the government, not the innovator, to decide the course of innovation.

... we have seen a definite turn in IP enforcement away from common law adjudication of disputes and towards a regulatory state, in which the government either directly decides who can enter the market, or distributes so many rights to block entry to so many people that it is impractical to enter the market without advance permission. A “Mother, may I?” regime is not one calculated to encourage the sorts of disruptive innovations that have driven economic growth in this country for the last 150 years (p. 109-15).

IP and copyright regulation is set at odds with the attention economy, as the legalities of it restrict a creative “free market” distribution style. This restriction then problematises copyright in terms for what Jenkins’ calls “spreadability”:

A spreadable model emphasizes the activity of consumers — or what Grant McCracken calls “multipliers” — in shaping the circulation of media content, often expanding potential meanings and opening up brands to unanticipated new markets. Rather than emphasizing the direct replication of “memes,” a spreadable model assumes that the repurposing and transformation of media content adds value, allowing media content to be localized to diverse contexts of use (Jenkins, 2009c, para. 5).

Spreadability is damaged when potential multipliers and active audiences do not want to risk legal fallout. The desire to protect seed properties from being taken advantage of by other creators, and so limiting awareness of the text, actually damages the level of attention that can be accrued by the seed. Ultimately, copyright is not encouraging to the proliferation of branch texts that can lead to a discovery, not only of new niche markets, but the attention that can refocus back on the seed.

As copyright stands, the system creates inequalities between seed and branch / new-seed texts. However, do branch and seed texts have to be in legal conflict? There are now different articulations of copyright, demonstrated by the development of the CC set of licenses (Creative Commons Organisation, 2011) that create a more open distribution channel for derivative texts. CC is a part of the “Copyleft” movement (Stallman, 2001; Don Hopkins, 1984-85, quoted in Stallman, 2008), and does not seek to overturn general copyright, but to actually *use* the law with more fine-tuned gradience. CC allows the creator to further contractually control the ongoing freedom of certain rights to their work. Copyright law reserves all rights (“all rights reserved”) over replication and distribution (excepting Fair Use provisions). Generally, copyrighted

works are set as the opposite of the public domain of expired copyright, or of works released for free in their entirety by the creator. CC, however, systematises a “some rights reserved” claim (Broussard, 2007), meaning that material released under this kind of “copyright” licence *constrains* users in certain ways via copyright law, whilst permitting usage in others. The constraints are not actually introduced by CC, but the licences explicitly use copyright law—as a delineation of possible communicable rights—to define which specifics are reserved and which are left free.

For example, a common license is the CC [By] Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 (CC BY-NC-SA); meaning that *via copyright law* a user of this licensed material is entirely free to share it and remix it, as long as they attribute the original creator, do not profit from it, and are prepared to release their own remix under similar terms. If they do not wish to follow these restrictions then the work defaults to all rights reserved.

Under this CC license, the problems for a full proliferation of branch and new-seed texts are still present, however, given that such a set up does not allow for works that can freely accrue attention and value on the open market (Baumol, 2002). Of course, there are other CC licenses, but the intent of this section is to question non- / commercial concerns and the particular usage of non-commercial (–NC) as an authorial control mechanism regarding derivative branch texts and the transferal of same toward a new-seed work.

Importantly, while the licenses do create movability within copyright—as a remix and modular expression of existing standards to redress the increasing control of culture via lengthening copyright terms (Lessig, 2004)—many of the complications of CC are actually a direct consequence of its relationship to copyright. It would not be fair to point the finger at the workings of the derivative system for what are, at its core, systemic issues within the parent copyright laws themselves; these more open licences can not then be expected to address the more general problems copyright has with derivative work. Rather, I wish to articulate how creators may attempt to utilise CC (or other similar copyleft licenses) in order to deal with attention and spreadability concerns, but that these goals do not make sense from within the holistic view of the copyright-

derived frameworks. This means that many of the issues already discussed with copyright as a hindrance to seed and branch, along with much of the complexity of the law, is intrinsically built-in to both copyleft and CC from their overarching relationship to copyright law.

Further, CC is not an absolute system itself, and all its rights can be waived at any time to a more pure CC0—a point which, in combination with broader social mores, becomes important later. However as an opt-in, ad hoc response to licensing control, it is still a part of the philosophical model that creates the problem in the first place. Seed and branch, however, is presented as a break with that tradition, by relaxing the legal control mechanisms, and focusing on cultural and social modes.

Authorship and Creative Commons

The CC –NC license (for the primary example) can clearly reflect some of the anxiety around misuse of a work by fan writers, as discussed around fan fiction in chapter three. However, given the evidence explored therein suggested that there was not much real economic harm in derivative branch texts, can CC –NC—which seeks to modify copyright to spread material—actually work to support branch works or new seeds in an attentional and spreadable way? Could seed and branch be supported via CC’s remixing of copyright, or would it likely be stymied?

When regarding the engagement with a broad textual ecology, CC –NC does not seek to question traditional concepts of ownership; it actually preserves copyright’s functions by privileging the original creator as limiting the ways in which the audience can engage with their work. This privilege is true of most CC licenses (excepting CC0), and Susan Corbett (2011) argues that the delineation of CC terms ends up presenting a “unified front” of copyright, and may in fact serve to further limit uses of the work which even stock copyright might allow:

Creative Commons licences rely upon the existence of copyright in all works and indeed the very use of a licence raises the presumption that the work to which it attaches is protected by copyright. This is not necessarily the case but, similarly to a “cease and desist” letter, the existence of the licence is likely to discourage any form of challenge to the existence of copyright in the work (or alternatively

the defence that the use of the work outside the terms of the licence was permitted as a fair use, or fair dealing, with the work) (p. 527).

This is entirely theoretical, and while it is true that CC does not overturn Fair Use, it does suggest that CC could be used—as an articulation of copyright—to be a kind of control mechanism. Not unlike using a proprietary file format to define uses, even when those uses are practical rather than systemic. While I am not suggesting the dismantling of capital and ownership, the problems of unauthorised access, DRM, Fair Use, etc., suggest that the full potential of a digital ecology of texts is unlikely to be realised if traditional understandings of, and protections for author / creator rights are maintained.

Indeed, while there are more “free” CC licences like [By] Attribution (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>), which seeks to give away many of the rights attributed to ownership, these licences still conflate the economic interests of copyright (intrinsic to CC) with the moral right of writerly attribution. It is important to note CC0 (<http://creativecommons.org/about/cc0>), which does attempt to move around many of these issues “to the fullest extent allowed by law” (“A Solution,” para. 1). However, in regards to the benefits to a broad textual ecology, it is the opt-in nature of these licences versus the broad acceptance of *copyright* as a philosophy which appears problematic; would Meyer ever have considered proactively opening *Twilight* to other writers to develop new-seeds—or if any licence, would she have utilised a –NC clause to act as a control mechanism in order to presume maximum commercial exposure, thus narrowing *Fifty Shades*’ impact? Is there, instead, another way to frame creative work that can better take advantage of both the social capital of a branch-seed-new-seed relationship, without such an overt control mechanism to marshal it?

Additionally, writer engagement under CC must also be considered. While CC does allow for specific, modular uses of a text beyond boilerplate copyright, it still involves complexities managed by the creator / incumbent. These complexities are often in fact more explicitly permissive than stock copyright, but the clauses may cause cognitive dissonance in the innovator / writer, and will further delineate the creative hierarchy in ways problematic to the textual ecology. Even a fully open licence such as CC0 requires a more sophisticated understanding of law and copyright jurisdiction than is often understood (Yu, 2004). This requirement for understanding is precisely in line

with copyright, however, in terms of maximising a textual ecology—to potentially benefit from a proliferation of branches and new-seeds—greater clarity is required.

Thus CC licensing, particularly the –NC variant, tends to decentralise writership—*but not authorship*—by encouraging use, re-use and remix (where any derivatives are allowed at all). Then, working alongside a limited version of the attention economy, this CC material is then to be leveraged by the original author toward building a further long tail—an extension of the commercial potential of the original (Anderson, 2004). Berry argues this creates a “commons without commonality”:

[Creative Commons] also comes packaged with a miserable, cramped view of culture. Culture is here viewed as a resource or, in Heidegger’s terms, “standing reserve”. Culture is valued only in terms of its worth for building something new. The significance, enchantment and meaning provided by context are all irrelevant to a productivist ontology that sees old culture merely as a resource for the “original” and the “new”. Lessig’s recent move to the catchphrase “Remix Culture” seems to confirm this outlook (2005, para. 7).

Berry is suggesting that CC—on a whole, though excluding CC0—actually acts to diminish the non-commercial value of culture by locking all texts into a utilitarian structure of use. CC privileges the genius of originality, placing the source material as an artificial origin (Corbett, 2011, as above). That is not a sole function of CC, of course, copyright also privileges the originator, but this privileging is highlighted in CC *because* of its openness to derivative work; it is an ironic turn that by articulating shareability, CC may actually enshrine its own limitations. This is because the new material is without its own context; it is forever a production of the original text—from the “original resource” that all derivatives draw from. Instead, using a concept like that of the author / writer split, authorial and economic rights could be delineated from the writer’s moral rights, and thus allow a new-seed to break from its instigating seed work.

Thus, it is not only the usage of a –NC licence that can disrupt branch and new-seed externalities, but the way in which CC works—as it works *in relation to copyright*—to maintain legal, rather than moral, authority. The relationship between original and derivative in CC continues to deny the fluidity that could exist between seed and branch to new-seed text by institutionalising the provenance of the textual family line. CC delineates the relationship, creating a highly visible line between beginning and

derivative. CC is not actually about its derivative texts, it is about describing the one-way legal relationship from that one original text onward (easily seen in the way in which original creators can alter their licensing terms, without sharing these same with previous licensees, Creative Commons Org, 2013, “What if I Change my Mind?”).

By choosing a CC licence like –NC—even more so than general copyright—in order to control the usage of a seed then complicates the creation of both fan branches, and also potentially beneficial new-seed works. While the non-commercial nature of particular licences—as an expression of control—does restrict commercial opportunities, fitting-in to a gift economy-like framework, the definition that CC creates of contributing writers as subsidiary and unable to become authors of their own new-seed also limits complementary attention being built around new, culturally unique works. The seed and branch concept, however, allows a freely distributed network relationship of texts, rather than linear dependence. The concept enables this textual ecology network, because a derivative text is able to transition from branch to new-seed and thus build its own divergent textual relationships and social capital values.

Subsidiary Fan Cultures

In relation to the non-commercial drive, I argue that CC then inherently supports the formation of a *subsidiary* fan culture. Not that the intent of CC is to limit derivatives to this subsidiary formation, but that the popularisation of the form is presented as a child-to-parent relationship.

As such, while CC –NC promotes user engagement by allowing derivative texts; it does not then engender the commercial interpolation of those same texts. This non-commercial restriction limits the authorial capital possible and so may narrow the potential for the creation of synergistic new-seeds. Fan writers may be encouraged to participate, but their works are not commercialised on the same level that the “original” is. Fan creators do not have the right to make full legal use of their work—they are, literally, legal subsidiaries of the original.

An author like Doctorow gives away ebook copies of his work in order to drive pbook sales (Doctorow, 2006), but the case of audio material for his book *Little Brother* (2008a), gathered from fan writers is a rather different story. The fan contributions may

be encouraged at one level, but they are not considered as valued as the original text. While Doctorow's use of the CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 licence allows for remixes (Doctorow, n.d.b) and includes a Computer-voiced MP3 Read-Aloud (2008b), the official Random House audio edition (2008c) does not draw from any of this user material. In fact, the official audiobook is under an entirely different licence as Doctorow himself says, "if you'd like [to]... buy the audiobook (it comes with a license that also allows you to remix and share any 30-minute sample of the work you choose to cut)" (2008d, para. 2). While the limitation may be due to the convergence of other contractual parties; it also shows that while Doctorow *asks* for remixes from his audience, but those fan texts will remain under non-commercial distribution (Doctorow, n.d.b).

The licence restriction explicitly denies the fan text an introduction to what is (via copyright) the "exclusive rights" of author- / ownership—a recognition of the text as created, not only derivative, but what Berry (2005) describes as the *cultural* rights of authorship. Instead, the licence relegates the fan work to a subsidiary status. If, instead, the fan text were commercially distributed under an individually negotiated copyright agreement—as in the case of audio material, above—then the fan may not necessarily receive any control over the seed text, but they would have a say in their own contribution, as a unique text. A text that they would then hold the power over; to revoke or renegotiate licensing, even though that "power" might only result in the moral option to withdraw their text from the market entirely (*Copyright Act 1976*, Section 203). More than being a part of the non-commercial, derivative element, the fan text would be a part of the market—whether recognised as a "conductor," other paid contributor, or with no economic exchange at all. Whereas, being a CC –NC derivative returns all authority over their derivative work, and all works in the textual lineage—even those drawing from derivative *fan* works—back to the privileged originator, as with control over their license. This is particularly important given the irrevocable nature of CC licences (Creative Commons Organisation, 2011), that a writer cannot terminate which rights they waived on the text as it was at the time licensed. While copyright likely should override CC in this case, the contract law of the licences is used to claim otherwise (Loren, 2007). Thus, the privileging works by the licence continually pointing back to the seed author, thus always reminding audiences of the branch writer's subsidiary

relationship to the original; problematising their own cultural transference to recognised, singular authority.

That is, CC delineates the creative relationship—it denies the cultural influence a branch text may have on subsequent works and concretises a fixed-point of origin. Of course, straight copyright does the same, but the artificial distinction between “official” copyrighted originals, and the potential of CC’s creative derivatives creates a sense of dissonance amongst texts; the derivative can never be recognised as culturally significant—cannot build its own authorial capital—because it is legally subservient to the original text. Significance and capital which would come from being able to be divorced from its seed, and to find its own audience, based upon its own merits. The lack of cultural significance may partly be an artifact of the confluence between the ideas of originality and authorship, however, it is also to do with its audience potentiality. If a branch text is understood to be “merely” derivative, then its set of potential audiences is constrained by preconfigured notions regarding its seed text. Simply, because CC *allows* derivatives, but privileges the original, it creates something not unlike a pyramid scheme of subsidiary texts. Awkwardly, general copyright gets around this complication, simply by being *less* embracing—yes, copyright limits what *can* be created, but does not then (by definition) limit what *has been* created as derivative under a CC-style mechanism. While this is not ideal, with neither outcome encouraging full engagement with the broader textual ecology, copyright rather promotes *fan* engagement instead of CC’s delineated writer silo, which arguably limits fan buy-in. Such an outcome is also possible with a CC author overriding the license for a particular writer / author, too, but that returns us to the “least” of the problematised outcomes: fan fiction created under Fair Use.

However, a branch or new-seed text which can reference its seed, without being beholden to it, can instead be discovered on its own terms, and so build its own relationship with fans.

After all, what really is the *creative* distinction between Doctorow and his fans, other than one of greater attention directed towards his work, and to the “official” versions of his works? Yes, they may take inspiration from his material, but their work is coherent in and of itself. There is a caveat that not all fans intend their material to sit

side-by-side with the authored seed, and of course, many other derivative works are of low quality—however, both situations would likely be reflected by the minimal attention they then accrue. At least under traditional copyright, the fan work would either be acknowledged as a unique creation of the fan by being officially endorsed, or by being *rejected* as a competitive text. There is of course the legal reality of being sued by a property owner, and that may also serve to limit fan engagement with the ecology, but CC puts it in a grey area of semi-respectability, where the fan text is viewed neither as complete nor as competitive. None of this is to say either response is ideal, just that CC does not actually help deal with developing the broader textual ecology, only for the individual texts within the purview of each license instance. Instead, a model centred around a free market for both social and economic capital could allow synergistic profits to be made, via a true engagement of writers and authors in the broader textual ecology.

Neither does the overarching CC framework place the original text as a commercial work by itself, as it presents only the first part of a textual continuum—by allowing derivatives, the original text places itself as an incomplete starting point. Instead, CC drives a textual ecology that can build value for any product in response. While this appears contradictory to the concept of CC being limiting, it is a further way in which the original is actually placed above any derivative text by being a fixed-point in copyright.

Non-Commercial Licenses and Sharing

The ethics of remix and participatory culture also tends to restrict the scope of uses that may otherwise be entitled by CC. Look at the concerns around the –NC licence and the confusion it raises. As Erik Möller explains, “the people who are likely to be hurt by an –NC license are not large corporations, but small publications like weblogs, advertising-funded radio stations, or local newspapers” (2007, “Profit,” para. 2). The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, a public radio station, decided in 2010 that it could not make use of any CC material due to the general propagation of the Non-Commercial option. As Chris Boyce, their Programming Director explained:

The issue with our use of Creative Commons music is that a lot of our content is readily available on a multitude of platforms, some of which are deemed to be

“commercial” in nature (e.g. streaming with pre-roll ads, or pay for download on iTunes) and currently the vast majority of the music available under a Creative Commons license prohibits commercial use (2010, para. 3).

The licence terms placed on the CC content, intended to help propagate the material, has in fact been manifested as a restriction of sharing.

CC brings its own issues to the potential disruption of spreadability, over and above general copyright, by forming a de facto structure for publishers who wish to encourage new fan works. Angry Robot (Angry Robot Books, 2012) and author Adam Christopher have created *World Builder* (<http://worldbuilderonline.com/>) around Christopher’s novel *Empire State* (2012). It is an invitation for audiences to take part in the fictional world he has created via their own para- and metatexts. Further, in a clause in the *World Builder* site, they state that given demand they may draw upon these texts and then publish them in publisher-led, commercial releases (with a cut of proceeds going to the fan creator.) Interestingly, in this example, branch texts from fan texts are transitioned toward publisher-led paratexts themselves. This *does* blur the distinction between amateur and professional, potentially encouraging engagement. However, how does this impact on attention and the textual ecology?

What the transition actually does is to further privilege the owner over fans. By granting themselves the sole avenue to commercial use, Angry Robot Books also creates disruption and competition amongst fan writers. Instead of utilising the cultural functions of a proposed concept like seed and branch, which allows the audience to offer attention in a free market, they are using legal methods to control entry and competition. Does this not return to the very issue that Jean Lamb had regarding Bradley’s use of her work: it leaves *all* commercial power with the privileged owner, and so limits fan engagement.

Models for Sharing

Are there other ways of approaching copyright and access? If the unauthorised use of an artist’s material—usage undertaken by either unauthorised access or by the unmediated creation of derivatives—cannot be stopped, can better use be made of it? Is this now an opportunity to draw upon other externalities such as attention and social values

(Masnick, 2010a)? If the distribution of fan branches and new-seed texts are the new status quo, then the broad textual ecology could be used to help support seed texts and their attention value. While it should be appreciated that there are artists who are not interested in accruing attention, the suggestion here is to deal positively with the current situation—the current status quo. As long as the artists retain their own usage of the material then this “problem” can become a simple case of wider exposure for attention accumulation.

While user licences are not equatable with copyright, I believe it is worth looking at how online services such as YouTube, which draw much of their value from user generated content, deal with control of ownership. YouTube’s user licence says:

By submitting Content to YouTube, you hereby grant YouTube a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicenseable and transferable license to use, reproduce, distribute, prepare derivative works of, display, publish, adapt, make available online or electronically transmit, and perform the Content in connection with the Service and YouTube’s (and its successors’ and affiliates’) business (YouTube, 2010, “Your Content and Conduct,” para. 3).

Facebook repeats similar terms (Facebook, 2011), but it also allows you to terminate the licence. These services can make money from user material (via their limited channels) without royalty, but this does not preclude the creator’s own commercial use elsewhere. Via the lens of an attention economy, such a model would allow professional publishers to make commercial use of fan material whilst simultaneously promoting an open, niche text ecology of fan works like *Fifty Shades of Grey*; see commercial experiments such as Figment (www.figment.com) buying HarperCollins’ fan fiction portal Inkpop (www.inkpop.com) (Hazard Owen, 2012a).

Importantly, this kind of model helps smaller authors and publishers to build awareness and attention via access to branch and seed texts, but does not harm larger publishers. That is because attention-based models may allow usage and distribution of branch texts, but still communicate textual relationships—not because of any legal necessity, but because this is the mode through which attention is built via reciprocal relationships (Ammann, 2011). While writers wish to gain attention from readers by citing attribution from seed authors, by pointing back to the seed, they may also dip in to the larger textual ecology of that seed to draw on increased social capital. While smaller

publishers may lose potential sales, with the increased discoverability of content, the chance of new audience members transferring to paying customers increases as well.

Attribution and Endorsement

Copyright and copyleft are punitive systems, whose use is activated *after* discovery of infringement, a problematic issue given the vast amount of textual material online. Instead, by encouraging a social capital and attention model, the act of infringing becomes worthless, without instead also *claiming* the material's true attribution; thus easier to locate via monitoring the writer or author's name, rather than the more nebulous creative work and derivatives thereof.

Looking at the issue of attribution with relation to social mores, Masnick states, "even in cases where there is no intellectual property right, social mores, social expectations and desire to keep one's own reputation, can actually solve such issues" (2010b, para. 5). His suggestion is that, drawing more from a journalistic ethos, having "stolen" material—that is, not properly attributing original authorship—would quickly circulate online and thus more negatively affect the thief than the author. Further, because all authorship is in some ways made in the public sphere of interaction—with seed texts functioning via attention—if the thief did not acknowledge the ecological relationships of that text, then the very worth of the stolen material is limited.

If the thief makes full, potentially infringing use of the material, however, that use actually helps *highlight* the originator. The attributors can still gain other forms of value for themselves, too, seen in cases such as Manuel Ortiz Braschi, a pseudonym for ebooks trawled from repackaged *Wikipedia* entries turned into informative ebooks (Flood, 2011), both criticised for the texts, but *also* selling them in reasonable numbers. Legally speaking, under *Wikipedia's* CC-BY-SA licence this is allowable, and also shows how free access texts can be re-worked for identified, niche audiences not otherwise served. This serving an unmet niche audience leads to further views on copyright and control.

Nina Paley, well known cartoonist and filmmaker, champions the "Creator Endorsed Mark" as a response to both the issues of restrictions and misattribution. The

Creator Endorsed Mark (Question Copyright .Org, 2009), which, when used in conjunction with another free licence such as CC BY-SA or CC0—*without* an –NC clause—is a (trade)mark, “that a distributor can use to indicate that a work is distributed in a way that its creator endorses—typically, by the distributor sharing some of the profits with the creator” (Fogel, 2009, para. 1). The Mark does not restrict or control use at all, instead it indicates moral *permission*. It is important to note before developing the concept further, that such an idea requires broad uptake. Without such broad use, the lack of the mark’s presence on any specific work is not necessarily indicative of its lacking creator permission, but rather of the obscurity of the idea itself.

The Mark does not stop any use, rather, it allows people to show social—rather than economic—relations to the seed text. While the likelihood is indeed for branch writers / new-seed authors to acknowledge their relationships with the seed author via the Mark, the distinction with this system is that instead of trying to use an enforcement system like copyright / CC, the Endorsed Mark sets up a voluntary, social capital exchange which can be transformed into an economic relationship. The key to it, however, is that it *is* voluntary. A derivative is free to be expressed outside of the CE Mark—or later be distributed without it, moving in and out of relationship with the seed, in order to be met on its own merits—though this does then limit the social capital synergy inherent in that public relationship. The lynchpin of the CE Mark is not whether an audience does or does not know it is a derivative, but that a text is free to be decoupled from the instigating text in the eyes of its potential audience.

The relationship between being able to create a commercial new-seed and building social capital amongst a broad textual ecology is delicate. The advantage of the CE Mark is to encourage maximised writer engagement, whilst building a more permissive system to then allow for fluid exchanges of both social and economic capital. The new-seed author is free to trade on the relationship with the seed, but not necessarily defined by it.

What the CE Mark means is that writer / authors can distribute both the original seed and their own derivative branch or new-seed texts as commercial items, but cannot necessarily state social endorsement by the creator. Paley argues along with Doctorow

that, “the Creator Endorsed Mark effectively achieves the same thing [as a CC –NC license], but without commercial monopolies. ... –NC licenses have some drawbacks: there’s no clear delineation between commercial and non-commercial use” (2010, para. 3). Doctorow has himself discussed the futilities of –NC, “it’s just stupid to say that an elementary school classroom should have to talk to a lawyer at a giant global publisher before they put on a play based on one of my books” (Doctorow, 2011, “The Copyright Thing,” para. 3). Paley continues her argument that:

Big players—”publishers and film studios and so on”—need your Endorsement. If they cross you and your fans, they have a huge publicity problem; if they obtain your endorsement and cooperation, they sell more copies. The Creator Endorsed Mark increases the monetary value of distributed works, and is an essential investment for a distributor to make (Paley, 2010, para. 5).

It actually allows for a strange inversion of Lessig’s “permission culture” (2003), in which the assumed stance is that use *is* permitted, but endorsement is not to be assumed.

The beauty of this distinction is that under such a Mark all players are on the same legal level for distributing and commercialising the material. Fans are allowed to engage with “corporately” authored texts, and vice versa, whilst also maximising the value of true writerly attribution. Given an infrastructure such as the Web, which allows for direct access to authors and writers, it is commercially advantageous to recognise the true author (either monetarily or by another agreement for endorsement), to better accumulate attention, as this builds stronger user engagement via the building of social capital (i.e., the excitement of a fan writer being attributed helps renew usage, increasing value). Thus, further externalities such as paid access to later texts and advertising revenue can accrue.

Furthermore, what this allows is a fluid, economically maximised relationship between many writers and an author at the textual nexus-point. Note, those roles *are* fluid and may shift within the same person, a branch text building with community attention and performance to a seed itself, bringing its writer to author status. So too, an author may move from a seed, to contributing on another text and then transitioning in that instance to being a writer of a branch work. It promotes fan and writer engagement with the seed text and their creation of branch para- and metatexts. Neither curtailing their activities (in fact, legally supporting them), nor hindering traditional “authors” or

publishers from making commercial use of the same seed. It gives each a stake in the over-all work—both commercially and by reputation. It also allows for writers (and others) to take their material away—of which they have full right to attribution—making their own attempts to monetise it. Whether that activity becomes a new community seed or not, it is not in competition with the original author, but in a peer relationship with it. Lunney, Jr. (2009) discusses “complementary” rather than “substitute” derivative works:

As long as the derivative reworking at issue is complementary, in that it increases demand for the underlying original, and occurs in a naturally competitive market, extending such control would frustrate, rather than serve, copyright’s ultimate purpose. . . . the copyright owner would also lose the increased revenue from her original that derivative reworking, as a complement, would, by definition, create. As a result, the “progress of Science” would be better served by placing derivative reworkings that are both complementary and that occur in competitive markets beyond the original copyright owner’s control. Such uses should be presumptively fair and non-infringing (p. 816-7).

“Increases demand for the underlying original” could be considered problematic, but viewing the branch text as in a relationship with the seed implies synergistic demand.

While an uncompetitive seed work—one that did not fulfill its own niche—may not be able to gain much traction versus its own branch, it may still benefit from a complementary work. That is because the social mores of the Internet support a structure for moral rights—as exemplified by the Creator-Endorsed Mark—both discouraging potential misuse, and *encouraging* ethical conduct. From that point, a work like *Fifty Shades* could better be integrated into the *Twilight* textual ecology, providing greater value and attention for both works. Without the chance to build its own audience, *Fifty Shades* very likely would not have had the opportunity to locate readers from outside the *Twilight* textual silo. The CE Mark paradigm provides all branch texts the opportunity to present as unique new-seeds, whilst smoothing the text’s re-engagement with the seed, and the subsequent audience synergy.

Wreaders and Hypertextual Performance

The monetisation of new-seed texts becomes possible not only via the commercialisation of discrete texts, but also by the mechanism of their transition from a branch text. I have discussed attention before as an unquantifiable value, however, the new-seed might

require a critical metric for the shift in an audience's textual perception. Of course, this need not be an audience-facing mechanism, but a theoretical one. Such a metric would need to measure how readers view particular branch texts, and so how a branch can then be understood to have achieved a shift from influenced, to influential work. As such, it is not only important to allow monetisation for branch texts, but also for other reader externalities.

Whilst this speaks against the gift economy discussed in chapter three, the focus here is not how to capitalise the texts, per se, but more to show how the textual ecology is commercially valuable itself. That is, in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* example, it was not the fan fiction that was commercialised, it was the new-seed which had grown its own critical attention, building authorial capital for “fan writer” James. The activity of the fan fiction was never commercialised, rather, the *attention* around it was. For example, *Master of the Universe* was never, itself, sold—but *Fifty Shades of Grey* was likely only considered economically valuable because it had existent audience attention. Vintage Books only picked up the trilogy after it had been released as print on demand by Writer's Coffee Shop, and that after success on FanFiction.net (James, 2013). Anecdotally, I know of readers who had previously read the entirety of the fan fiction, but who then bought copies of the commercial text. Doctorow has fans in a similar position, where he directs them to purchase externalities rather than donate to him, whilst having already read the text in question (n.d.a). *Fifty Shades* may then be sold as a text itself, but it was the potential value of readers of *Master* that was actualised. Without the audience attention the fan fiction would never have transitioned to its own new-seed.

So, while attention and a healthy textual ecology are both important, it is important to look at how the audience may perform their own *readership* in the textual space; how they display interest. This is the way in which a branch text can be transformed into a new-seed: by accruing social and authorial capital. It has less to do with the creation of discrete para- or metatexts themselves, and more in the way which reading becomes a textually communicative activity itself. Reading can become a whole performative text—separate from the distinct seed and branch texts which only gather around the locus of individual texts. Reading forms an interactive text of participation amongst networks of readers (Cover, 2006).

While authors can of course perform their own text, here I am specifically defining performance as an activity of give and take, requiring interaction more than the “performance” of the physical craft of writing (Robinson, 2003). That limits more discrete and authored texts to having been recorded, making it distinct from the dynamism of responsive readership performativity. It is not unlike recorded music versus the experience of a concert—though the musician performs the discrete text in that instance, and may alter it somewhat on the night, it is the audience that “performs” themselves as a community of that moment.

Given the fluidity of the author / writer relationship amongst seed and branch texts, the opportunity to express community membership as a reader, and thus to build social capital within that community is vital. After all, movement from branch to new-seed is not merely due to the existence of the fan text itself, but also to how that text can accrue attention, as with *Fifty Shades*. Note that in the case of digital publishing the boundaries between reader and writer are symbiotic; in order to become a writer, one must have read; but attendantly, in order to *exist* as a reader, one must have communicated that state via writing, or another performative act. Offline, such an act can of course be ephemeral, but via digital mediation it forms a persistent media itself. This is simply because the Web is primarily a “textual” medium (in the term’s broadest sense), and so to be a part of the reader community one must either write text, or write *into* the text of social capital (here, video and audio are considered persistent “texts”).

Stein and the Institute for the Future of The Book performed a social reading experiment called *The Golden Notebook Project* (<http://thegoldennotebook.org/>) in 2008. The project had seven women authors reading Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* over five to six weeks, publically commenting on the work in the margins of the online text as they progressed. What can be seen with this particular experiment is more the creation of paratexts, as the participants wrote in contextual thoughts, with little in the way of interpersonal writing; looking more as if they were co-authoring a critique than their own responses. The site itself notes its limitations:

Good conversations are messy, non-linear and complicated. The comment area, a chronological scrolling field just isn’t robust enough to follow a conversation among an infinite number of participants. Seven may even be too many (Institute for the Future of the Book: London and Apt, n.d., “How Come Only the Seven Women can Comment in the Margins?” para. 1).

The limitation is disappointing, given the projects own contradiction of “good conversations are messy” and the subsequent constriction to a controlled environment. It is understandable, but what it achieves is to create a branch paratext, rather than encourage textual performance. It is an interesting model for what could be done with in-line reading, however. In order to envisage how such conversations could be managed, look at Google’s ill-fated Wave as a model for different views of many interpolating comment threads. Another example would be Twitter’s *One Book, One Twitter* (<https://twitter.com/1B1T2010>) that was an entirely open conversation about Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2003). While much more of a mess, this project was about building the community as a form itself, and not so much about consistent, discrete texts. Jeff Howe, who instigated the project, said:

It is not, for instance, an attempt to gather a more selective crew of book lovers to read a series of books and meet at established times to discuss. The point of this (to the extent it has a point beyond good fun with a good book) is to create community across geographical, cultural, ethnic, economic and social boundaries (2010, para. 8).

Returning to the idea of “social capital,” we can see an economic value in this textual performance of readership. As Bourdieu said, social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1985, p. 248). This makes *attention* measurable as a resource—in a way only physical objects once were—by monetising the performance of social capital. By putting a price on access; not to the text itself, but to the reader *network*.

The inspiration for this reader performance concept comes from the music industry and its split between recorded media and live, experiential performance. As with the growth in ebook sales (“E-book sales up 188 per cent,” 2012), there are growing digital sales in music (Williams, 2012; Hampp, 2012). While these increased *sales* are yet projected to overtake physical *profits*, there is an overall industry growth drawing from music externalities such as concert attendance.

As Edgar Bronfman, chairman of Warner Music said, “the music industry is growing... [but the] record industry is not” (as reported in “A Change of Tune,” 2007). Mortimer, Nosko and Sorsensen say that:

For artists, the decline in revenues from recorded music after 1998 is striking, but appears to have been more than offset by a concomitant increase in concert revenues. Total industry revenues, on the other hand, have not fully recovered, despite the increasing contribution of concert revenue to the total (2010, p. 32).

This “total industry” relates to the drop in the *recording* industry, which now begins to draw upon concert performance revenues they have previously left to artists and independent promoters. This further relates to Benkler, claiming that it:

Is the business model of appropriation that more than a decade ago, Esther Dyson and John Perry Barlow heralded as the future of music and musicians. They argued in the early 1990s for more or less free access to copies of recordings distributed online, which would lead to greater attention at live gigs. Revenue from performances, rather than recordings, would pay artists (2006, p. 45).

Musicians on labels once derived two thirds of their income from recorded music and the remainder from touring, merchandise and endorsements; those numbers have now been switched (“A Change of Tune,” 2007). Industry practice is beginning to change, too, with “360°” contracts coming into play; contracts which bring the music recording labels into the concert promotions equation.

It is the performance space that becomes most interesting because concerts and live performances have a number of benefits to both artists and labels; driving increased album sales in the weeks around a concert, which further grows concert attendance (Mortimer, Nosko and Sorsensen, 2010, p. 19; Benkler, 2006, p. 45). Concerts also mediate losses from peer-to-peer file sharing and unauthorised access by *benefiting* from an increased attention relationship, “while file-sharing may have eroded profits from CD sales, it also increased the profitability of live performances” (Pollock, 2007). While Mortimer, Nosko and Sorsensen do note that focusing on performances may drive artists to work less on creating content, putting their efforts into the more lucrative performance space (2010, p. 11, 26), what is most important to the industry is that much of the performance value is emergent. The value comes from the audience enjoying the live experience, not only protecting recorded media from file-sharing erosion, but being directly created by its participants. It may impact on the artist-led creations, but in terms of revenue, the industry grows from the audience’s engagement. It is a *growth* segment, not only due to the numbers of performances, but also because of the monetary value

that audience participants appear to place and build into them (Mortimer, Nosko and Sorsensen, 2010, p. 15-6).

There are, however, obviously significant *differences* between book publishing—an intrinsically textual media—and the “performance” of live music (Bockstedt, Kauffman and Riggins, 2005; Peoples, 2012). How does this relate more broadly to the book publishing industry, given they do not traditionally have such a broad performance space? Can music performance concepts be related to text-based activities? It may not be as unusual an idea as it at first seems, however. I have already explored the textual ecologies of para- and metatexts, of seeds and branches as authors and writers build them, and it would not take much to view the flow between those activities as a kind of performance of reading.

While my discussion has been around those discrete texts, it becomes even more apparent as a kind of performance when the audience’s reading activity—a flow of engagement—is communicated online to broader reader communities. Whereas in the past such a “performance” would have been limited to reader “performativity”—that is, the way in which a reader signifies that they are a member of the reading community with in-jokes and references—now readers can perform readership as writers. There is a strong history of this kind of activity with fanzines and print culture, but it is the in-line nature of the online performance that creates a complex ecology which print could rarely have matched in scope or distributive influence.

As an example of reader performance I point to publisher Tor and their website Tor.com (www.tor.com), and the book series read-throughs they have on the site in the lead up to new publications. Approaching the release of *Wheel of Time: Memories of light* (Jordan & Sanderson, 2013) the site had read-throughs for the whole series leading up to that point (<http://www.tor.com/features/series/wot-reread>), and also released snippets of the forthcoming book (<http://www.tor.com/features/series/a-memory-of-light>). What is important here is that due to the mysteries of the series, readers contributed much to the official blog posts by suggesting interpretations based upon their own earlier reading. Just as audiences make resistant readings of characters from source texts (Fetterley, 1981), these readings are not necessarily written as discrete metatexts, but can also exist as texts *of* social capital. Readers creating their own

interpretations of the text in order to express themselves and their social relationships. The particular case of the *Wheel* is illustrative because of the massive scope of the text (over 4 000 000 words), leaving space for readers to build many divergent theories of fictitious history; material that may never be concretised. Reader interpretation becomes a socialised performance space.

Textual flows are audience response *as a text*, communicated back to the original creator and to other audience members. The performativity works in much the same way as the concert participant would express their engagement—but as a hybridised form of the recorded and experiential, it becomes its own textual space. The reader-writer does not necessarily consider it a text, but it can be understood as an example of Wilson’s “usage” as value (2001). A performance by readers may accumulate around a loci seed, drawn to and creating further attention, but driven by the reader’s own sense of social capital. Due to the persistent nature of these online fan text discussions, they are related to, but distinct from, authored and written material as discrete texts.

Baym observes of soap opera fans that “the Internet gives fans a platform on which to perform for one another, and their informal performances might please fans more than the official ones do” (2000, p. 216). These are the text ecologies already discussed, but this also shows that it is not only the fan product that may be engaging, it might also be the experience of taking part that provides value. Certainly, this also allows for the author of the seed text to “perform” paratextual annotations, but it also suggests a new textual event space to be developed by publishers and authors. It takes the communicative possibilities of digital and online texts to create a kind of performative and experiential form which book publishing has never before had on such a level. I am not discounting the importance of reading groups and fan conventions—particularly amongst genre readers—however, the distinction here is that performative *texts* reflect the activities of such informal group discussions, but in a considerably less ephemeral form. “From a broader perspective, social reading at this level enables a redefinition of content to include the conversation engendered by the text” (Stein, n.d., para. 5). In this case, the “readers” as a group build a performative space for the text.

Some hypertext theorists call active audience participants “wreaders” (Carusi, 2006; Landow, 1994), defining the role “as much a producer of texts as a consumer of

them” (Allen, 2003, “The New Old Reader,” para. 1). Wreaders make a “non-trivial effort” to understand a hypertext by helping to construct the *readable* text itself from the choices presented by the form (Aarseth, 1997). A wreader helps structure the text in order to then read it. The text a wreader creates is an ergodic literature where these are “texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptons” (1997, p. 75). The “scripton” is part of information:

It is useful to distinguish between strings as they appear to readers and strings as they exist in the text, since these may not always be the same. For want of better terms, I call the former scriptons and the latter textons. Their names are not important, but the difference between them is (1997, p. 60).

What he means is that the reader of a text must help process the possibilities of the text to make sense of it. Aarseth is discussing games, as expressed via the hypertext literature genre, but it is also a useful point of view to take on engaging whole audiences around text as performance. Games are a great way to look at engagement via “the process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” (Zichermann, 2011, p. xiv). The use of game-like attributes in other media, to draw users into social competition with each other in what would otherwise be an entirely personal experience. Gamification can be seen in applications and communities such as Last.FM (<http://www.last.fm/>), which provide a constant stream of what its membership (and your own friends) are *currently* listening to; and “mobile” services such as Get Glue (<http://getglue.com/>), which allow viewers and readers to “check-in” to the texts they are engaging with at that time. The sense of choice to communicate media use to others helps create relationships, but is also used to provide “in-game” rewards. These rewards can be tokens to exchange for advantages, but may also be quite intangible (like achievement badges that do little other than form a tangible leaderboard for social capital).

While ludologists (such as Aarseth) predominantly focus on the way in which the singular text of a game (in its own hypertext plurality) provokes a narrative choice, gamification takes this same concept and places it amongst everyday activities. The game choice in a gamified context is around whether you choose to perform your engagement or reading to your own social network or not. It places an individual audience member’s media consumption into stark relief, and often drives further use by

tapping into the user's sense of social capital competition. The choice can be used for positive outcomes, with potential effects being researched including increased employee engagement by providing communicable rewards for incremental challenges (Brownhill, 2013), and student research and library use motivated by gamifying the catalogue (Kim, 2012). Within book publishing, there are new social reading services such as Kobo's "Reading Life" (<http://www.kobobooks.com/readinglife>) that allow you not only to gain similar rewards for your reading (such as achievement badges, "Vampire Hunter," and so on), but also to compare your own reading statistics with friends'. Such gamification is not really about engaging with authors or creating branch texts, but helping to form signals of community membership.

It is important to note that services like "Reading Life" and Amazon's text highlighting feature on the Kindle (Amazon.com, Inc., 2012b) are often locked to particular hardware vendors and digital distribution companies. New, cross-vendor services such as GetGlue and Bookshout! (<http://bookshout.com/>) look to open the field of these game-like rewards. However, limited publisher buy-in, resulting in the constriction of the actual titles on offer in these more open services, remains a problem. Not that this performance of reader social capital can be owned by any one provider, the services may only offer the space in which readers come together. However, the level of usage can then be understood and leveraged as attention by singular aggregators like Amazon or Bookshout!

Reading performativity is not only about demonstrating having read, it is also about social reading; readers performing the very activity of reading as they engage in it. Kobo's "Reading Life," Amazon's Kindle highlights and services like BookShout! make this not only about the communication of reading statistics to reflect textual performance, but also an interpretation of the material. "Social reading" begins to factor into engaged textual performance; the activity of reading along with others. As Bob Stein says, "Social reading is no longer an oxymoron" (Stein, 2011). While reading is often considered a private, silent matter, knowledge lends itself to being communicated and readers have historically related what they have read to others. Digital content now helps facilitate this activity by allowing *in-line* social reading. Digital texts can be

written back into and those reader interpretations can be shared with other readers.

Sharing may help the discoverability of new texts, by reader relating to reader, making:

A “review as you read.” Reviews will become more like close readings with electronic annotations, and books will come pre-loaded with comments from “expert readers.” Alternatively, comments and commentaries could come from multiple sources to form a single review text, a review constantly subject to further shaping and review, collected in the fashion of a “wikireview” (Di Leo, 2012, p. 24).

It may also help engender willing engagement amongst reluctant readers. For example, Ercegovic (2012) explored this with the ReadReviewRecommend project with secondary school students empowered to share their views on reading material online to their peers. It is not only this social recommendation that occurs but it also creates a greater depth of understanding. When readers discuss their interpretation of the texts *during* reading, they can both share ideas, help clarify misunderstandings and locate subtleties implied by the text without having this mediated by imperfect memory (Heisey & Kucan, 2010). Certainly, this is not unique to digital distribution, but the scope of interpretive relationships are much greater online.

Returning to Aarseth and to Iser (a reader-response theorist), performance also works as a methodology for understanding the effort involved in making sense of a text, in the way that Iser discusses the performance of fiction:

The aesthetic semblance can only take on its form by way of the recipient’s ideational, performative activity, and so representation can only come to full fruition in the recipient’s imagination; it is the recipient’s performance that endows the semblance with its sense of reality (Iser, 1989, p. 243).

Aarseth says that a reader of traditional literature is powerless and cannot ask, “let’s see what happens when I do this” (1997, p. 4), readers merely following along as the author or writer has written. Iser and Aarseth obviously do not entirely agree (given Iser is discussing traditional literature in his discussion of performance), but where they both come together is in the requirement by the reader to perform an action in order to create their own meaning. A text is nothing by itself until the audience brings a part of themselves to complete its own suggestion (Ruthrof, 1997). This situates all text as a kind of interactive activity requiring reader actualisation.

Along with Iser’s earlier concept of the “text” as distinct from the actualised “work,” performance and cybertext come together with communicative hypertexts.

Performance of textual *meaning* may require choice, but this may take place divorced from *social* performance. However, the connected world offers great opportunities for social reading. Iser said that:

The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader [making the work] (Iser, 1972, p. 279).

A work relies on the reader making decisions—based on their own experiences—to fill and actualise the text’s indeterminacies. Like the activity required for Aarseth’s *texton to scripton*, when progressing Iser’s theory through a *hypertext*, there is a further development with the idea of the *hyperwork*.

Landow discusses a kind of “hyperwork,” meaning the activity of navigating the choices in a hypertext document (Landow, 2004), collapsing its options into one possible text—through which that reader may then actualise Iser’s textual indeterminacies. However, I view this as only partially realised as a concept, not discussing meaning but merely examining the structure of the text before reader actualisation; it just adds a new layer of textual construction. From this point, a reader may take their one text and actualise it as a traditional work. This is Web-like interlinking being used to make direct texts, without then allowing the *meanings* discovered therein to be performed with the same kind of many-to-many relationships that a hypertext is actually so good for. An online hypertext can allow a reader to actualise their reading of the text as a kind of communicated and interlinked *hyperwork*—perhaps, to invoke O’Reilly, this is a hyperwork “2.0.” A hyperwork, then, is a communication of the experience of actualising a text to other readers. The idea of the hyperwork 2.0 allows for a performance text of social reading.

It is worthwhile noting that such engagement amongst readers of texts—*writing* to texts—will further disrupt the easy sense of the romantic author, where:

If a work is always in process, what does that imply about versions and authority? Here is the most radical thing I have thought of saying in a while: I think that the idea of an authoritative edition may disappear. Take *Gamer Theory* [a follow-on from *The Golden Notebook Project*], for example, with the conversation taking place in the margins. That happens all day long, so freezing it at a particular moment, while doable, doesn’t mean what it used to (Stein, quoted in Creech, 2008, p. 51).

Such a setup *demands* the reorganisation of the author / writer split as the legal owner / attributable co-creator, allowing us to view an emergent text as a bounded text. Without which the concept of communicability breaks down, as the relationship formed by the seed locus becomes situational, without any framing context; conversational, but not communicable as organised text. The author / writer split allows the dual texts to develop, to be claimed as granular utterances, which an ongoing—in-versioning text—would not be able to be. A “draft” text has no claimant, because it lies under conversational ruling and is not yet published as a complete string to be analysed. The author / writer setup is a form that works as a filter through which to view many textons as different situational works; the “authored” text, then, is a (legal) choice within many cybertext / hyperwork outcomes.

Comments on Stein’s *Taxonomy* (n.d.) question how the “phenomenological modes of interacting with texts [blends] with genres of communication (whats [sic] going on between readers and authors)” (Bernius, 2010, para. 1). However, this issue of what occurs by complicating these roles is also met by defining the author / writer split, and that of the wreader sitting between the two as an empowered agent who helps structure the text and may / may not create their own (para- / meta)texts. Importantly, the wreader also allows for the movement of an individual between an author’s seed to related, and non-related written branches and the return. Wreaders are the connective tissue between the two roles (author / writer), allowing for the transference between static authorship, and formless—un-mediated—writing. The wreader is a role which facilitates the change from many *written* text(on)s to a claimed and *authored* text (and vice versa). Wreaders are the active role in the hyperwork, and so the role that facilitates fluid movement between authors and writers.

The “vice versa” nature of the wreader is important because it promotes a diverse textual ecology, rather than the top-down, linear nature of author->writer->reader. The wreader allows for the decontextualisation of scriptons from the authored work back into textons, to then be reorganised by writers and readers to become newly authored hypertext(s). Each role can be performed by any person, para- and metatexts shifting between seed and branch(es).

The wreader-writer model creates value by the performances which already occur

in the activity of reading and creating; with the fluidity of text(on) reorganisation allowing readers and writers to create new, whole texts which fill new needs and niches as suggested by the reading performance *activity* of the community. Common reading performance can be used as a way to understand a textual ecology, and indeed, digital texts and *publishing* can become a new kind of textual performance media itself.

The new hyperwork 2.0 creates further space for textual performance, a kind of networked, in-line—as opposed to temporally and spatially separated—reading that allows for greater understanding of a text by immersing readers in the activities of their peers. In a practical experiment of this exact point, Stein outlines a *Taxonomy of Social Reading* (n.d.), for both off- and online reading, coming to “Category 4 — Engaging in a discussion IN the margins (online, formal, synchronous or asynchronous, persistent).” Saying that this is unique because:

As opposed to blogs, where comments appear beneath the author’s text, CommentPress and similar platforms place reader’s comments in the right-hand margin. This design makes the conversation an integral part of the text, in effect extending the notion of “content” to include the discussion it engenders (n.d., para. 1).

Reflecting my own discussion of para- and metatexts, by broadening the concept of what activities border the text it becomes less (necessarily) *about* the seed text at all, and becomes about the community of reading itself. A commentator on the *Taxonomy* site says, “in a way, public reading acquires the intimacy of reading someone else’s comments on the margins of his / her book, but at the same time being a participant in the act” (Gaitan, 2010, para. 1). The experience is in sharing the *intimate* reading of another, whilst also happening to be involved in the shared material yourself. It does not necessarily reflect the content of the material—just as Amazon’s shared highlighting may not make any *sense* to a broader readership outside of the idiosyncratic context of the marker themselves—instead, it is a performance of reader community. In this way, the seed text and all its branches merely become a locus point for the broader reading community and their shared and diverse interpretations. The attraction is in the connection of being involved in the same action. However, this does not diminish the impact it has back on the seed, as that performance of community strengthens not only the interpretive potential of each reader, but also returns to Wilson’s “usage equals

value” (2001, p. 383). The relationships that are facilitated by the text-space reflect on all the texts as a hyperwork 2.0 worth engaging with.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the fluidity of roles between writer and author and the ways in which branch texts can accrue attention and develop into new-seeds themselves. It is an important function, because it helps develop a greater interaction of textual relationships to then help build broader textual ecologies. A new-seed text can both draw attention from its own original seed, and it can also feed attention accrued from a different niche audience back to that original.

Without a more open view of copyright, and indeed a more permissive rights system than even Creative Commons allows, complementary derivative branches are somewhat stymied. What this means is that only those branches that suit the delineations of copyright and CC are likely, creating silos of matched original and derivative texts. Even truly transformative texts are likely to be considered socially subsidiary to the original seed; instead, new-seeds are able to be marketed to wholly new audiences, and thus make it possible to create more diverse textual networks.

Textual performance works then to help create a space for new-seeds to be developed—whilst also providing emergent value for authors and publishers.

Conclusion

At the Media in Transition Conference (2007), Tom Pewitt talked about what he terms the Gutenberg Parenthesis, stating we are at the end of four hundred years domination of print and recorded media (Pewitt quoted in Walker-Rettberg, 2008, p. 8). This interbellum parenthesis was characterised by the fact that texts could be autonomous and fixed, that text and cultural objects were only composed once, then merely passively reproduced by readers, musicians or performers. However, as Jill Walker herself notes, we are now returning to a “privileging of the performance as a fluid happening that relies on other performances and will influence further performances” (p. 8).

Pewitt does say that there will be differences between our pre- and post-parenthetical societies, however (Walker-Rettberg, 2008). Such differences will lie in our ability to interlink and communicate those performances, creating new, atemporal, and distributed “performance” media; non-ephemeral text—unlike the situationally bound experiences of music performance—yet also a dynamic media, requiring the fact of its own (re)versioning in order to present as a complete text. In such an environment, the ebook media would be both protected from piracy concerns, and also provide an avenue for profits unique to itself.

In exploring this potential, my exegesis has focussed on how book publishers and authors can better work together to take advantage of the digital textual ecology; in particular, on the ways that authors and publishers might best leverage active readership, along with the broader textual ecology, whilst making use of existing publishing skills for the new ebook medium.

How can this robust kind of ebook media be built? As my exegesis has shown, evidence suggests that there is still money to be made in the content industries, with users willing to pay given reasonable commercial opportunities. Further, a great deal of both the economic and social value in book publishing revolves around the reader’s engagement with text. If, then, it is actually the reader-author / publisher interaction that is at the core of the book publishing experience, then existent *textual* skills are still paramount, rather than hypermedia-like experiments. Rather than attempting to control forms of

distribution or creating costly experiments, then, publishers and authors would be better building closer relationships with their readership, using trust as the way to direct sales, instead of imposed constraints.

In contrast to many of the current author-centric theories, the argument I have developed looks at how authorship and being “published” can be understood in the digital environment as a continuing relationship with readers. This relationship is achieved by acknowledging the creation of interrelating para- and metatexts, along with the persistent texts of readership itself. My argument is that the book publishing industry should embrace the activity of readers—not only as participatory culture (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel & Robison, 2009d), but also as direct economic expediency, turning unfettered textual ecology into value (both social and economic) for the support of all texts.

Thus, I suggest that the future of book publishing lies not in restricting access to text, nor in developing hybrid “book” forms. Rather, it is about taking advantage of the *textual* work already being performed by authors, writers and (w)readers, within a publishing ecosystem of seed and branch texts. A reconfiguration of roles may be required, along with a more permissive take on copyright, which I believe can then allow for greater social and economic values for all texts and participants.

A Music Model for *Textual* Performance?

How may such a performance model work in the book industry? As discussed in Chapter Four, “textual performance” is not equatable with music performance, as that signifies the *performance* of the seed text, by its “author”—or contracted performer—as well as the social capital performativity of the audience performing itself *as* a fan group. Rather, in the ebook space the persistent para- and metatexts of audience performativity become a distributed text *of* that readership. They become a record of social inclusion, in line with the seed text itself. The text of readership performance can then be leveraged as emergent value, but significantly, can also be curated by publishers as an extension of the seed text.

As noted in Chapter Four, reader engagement enriches the seed text; social reading and branch texts create more of the central content readers sought in the first place.

Further, developing work into a new-seed requires drawing from the *existing*, paying customers of the seed—in order to “damage” the value of an author’s brand, the fans first need to help create it.

Moreover, this new text space is innately capitalistic, as Stein says in his

Taxonomy:

If the teacher expects you to do your homework in the margin of the book or document being studied, you have to buy “your own copy” so that you can show up in the margin as yourself. It won’t do to get a pirated copy or a password from another student (n.d., para. 5).

Performance hyperworks (2.0)—the communicative text of networked reader interpretations—then solve issues of authorisation by binding the performance value to an identity economy—why take part if you cannot then be attributed to the work as a writer? More importantly, by opening the text to other writers and encouraging their interaction, the performance value draws upon existent activity to protect the author / publisher property. What might help save the publisher brands from fracture may be the reader / writer’s desire to control their own content (see Bookshout! as an example of a publisher-agnostic reader community, at www.bookshout.com). Beyond mere technical distribution, the author and publisher may take part in these events, bringing them, as actors, back into direct, ongoing relationship with the reader in a way that distributors are not.

Publishing Model for Textual Performance

As explored in my creative work, the economic model suggested is less to do with selling seed text, and more to do with harnessing the attention that accrues around the seed loci. What this does is to change the relationship between publisher and author; not as is currently occurring with authors being sidelined by publishers, but by altering the concept of a text being “published.” By opening the practice up to all authors and their readers, it can then be easier to gauge engagement with the textual ecology, via a free market-style attention economy.

In this hypothetical model, I examine what could happen when an “authored” text becomes central to an ecology of many other seed and branch texts; it is not static, but displays living, changing characteristics. The author gains a new avenue for building

attention, responding to the text's ecology of readers and writers in order to navigate the fluid movement of value between seed and branch. The author's engagement with the living ecology of texts helps to build reader hyperworks—which not only supports their own author branding, but also creates usage value that then supports the development of publishing as an industry. Implicit in this broader ecology is the increased scope of material and social capital that the audience both creates for others, and earns from both the author and other peer-readers. Importantly, that material and social value is emergent and thus supports its own creation.

The fluidity between roles of writer and author is also important because the informality of it allows for a greater interaction of textual relationships, with multiple texts from different authors being placed in conversation with one another. Without the chance for a writer to become an author in their own new-seed—and indeed, without the recognition of the role of writership itself, which can then allow an erstwhile author to perform previously “amateur” functions within branches—each seed text may very well have its own halo of branch works, but would still be siloed from others. Each text's reader and writer engagement would be restricted to that singular work's context. By validating the nature of writer-author-writer as a spectrum—as it is expressed via branch to new-seed text—the book publishing industry becomes networked. Reading would no longer be restricted to close circles of authors and readers, but could expand to social writing and reading.

Chapter Four explored the example of *50 Shades of Grey* (James, 2011), an unofficial branch text of *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005). Starting as online fan fiction, since it has become a published new-seed, it has arguably helped the original seed text to build related, but distinct audience attention. That means the value of one seed and its branches can actually be shared amongst other related works.

The fluidity between roles and texts can help create a social and attentional relationship; product mindshare that might once have been accrued by pbook shelf-space could now exist between people. While this is not yet a broad practice, by loosening copyright laws to encourage fan and reader engagement, authors and publishers would be able to tap in to a writing practice that is currently performed by fans but marginalized by the industry.

The seed and branch ecological model helps answer a very pertinent question: why would a reader or writer necessarily “gift” their social capital value to an author, instead of the more current practice of to a third-party, and “unbiased” aggregator like Bookshout!? The answer is that this interrelationship between writer and author roles is best displayed by the possibility of the seed author then becoming a *writer* in a new-seed grown from their own work. Of course, it also allows an author to be “demoted” to the status of writer in another author’s previously unrelated seed—by “demotion,” I use the existing sense of restrictive authority, whereas my point is that under this new model, the writer is recognised with their own, unique value. Once again, the writer of *Twilight* fan fiction becomes the author of a new-seed, *50 Shades*, to which Meyer, the author of the original seed, can now *write* back to as a member of the audience. While an author like Meyer may not *want* to write back to the new-seed, the potential of this interrelationship helps to legitimise attention-building textual engagement.

It is this kind of regard that may then highlight the interrelationship amongst fans and writers with authors, so building a textual performance space. This is because the interplay between writer-author-writer and their texts creates a dynamic, rather than a static media. Writers are invited into the hyperwork 2.0 performance spaces, because they are implicated in the creation of texts alongside authors. The seed and branch model also further helps the idea of creator-endorsement because it helps situate text as a service, not a product, thus highlighting the author / writer as present and engaged. Writers are empowered by being equated with authors—given shifting authority and social capital considerations—and authors gain awareness and attention to their work and roles, even more so than to any singular text.

Of course, this is quite a shift in the work that an author might be expected to perform. However, one of the central ideas driving this model, is that authorship and publishing is already in flux; seed and branch is a model to take advantage of already existing work being made by readers and capitalising on it. By empowering fans and writers, authors gain a great deal of attention and potential audience members via broader discoverability, *without* attempting to grow market share with moves like costly hypermedia experiments or questionable legal sanctions.

In such an ecology, the publisher would also literally be able to provide the site for

these interactions to take place, with the social mores around reader / writer communities helping to both build broader textual ecologies and also to police themselves against inappropriate usage. There is some work like this being done, such as with Angry Robot Books' *World Builder* and Tor.Com, however, this is still quite simple, with more scope to be developed. The potential advantage for publishers is that new social capital drives engagement around textual loci, which then helps accrue critical attention around branch texts transforming them into new-seeds—and their writers into named authors. While this could be construed as a threat to the original seed text, the aforementioned social mores, and the fulfillment of un-tapped niche fields can help build attention around all texts. Working alongside readers, authors and writers can help build a hyperwork 2.0 of a dynamic textual ecology in order to support a feedback loop of attention, creating greater values for all texts.

The business structure required for this concept may not work as an “advance versus royalties” model—given that this traditional model derives from the text being sold as “complete,” rather than the necessarily ongoing systemic author-publisher relationship of the living textual ecology. Instead, the model I explore would rest on a different business model, formalising the relationship between author and publisher, extending it beyond a “publication” date. Instead of an advance, an author could be paid an “embargo,” the terms of which would be to restrict the author’s para- and metatextual discourse of that seed to publisher-controlled environs. It would be a formalisation, and monetisation, of the publicity work an author would likely otherwise do for free (as seen regarding film and television supplementaries, in Chapter Two). Instead of the current move to place the risk onto the author, this system would create a kind of salaried “author” role, extending beyond traditional business engagement in order to maximise the emergent value of textual ecologies in digital distribution.

As noted in Chapters Three and Four, the relationship built around social capital in the digital textual ecology creates its own value. Whether the readers and writers directly pay for access or not (for e.g., an ebook site which exists on advertising or other externalities), the ecology creates a positive reason to engage with the author and publisher. The engagement can then be leveraged to not only protect against

unauthorised access—by limiting its social value—but also to support business relationships like that described by the Creator-Endorsed Mark.

However, while the seed and branch model offers a lot of promise for the publishing industry, there is still quite a bit of work required to transition from the problems with earlier explorations in the ebook form, and my proposed ideas.

Significance and Future Study

The proposed social reading model would need more comprehensive consideration of economic implications, however, due to my creative focus, this has not been the primary concern of this exegesis. Instead, my research has focused more on the skill sets and relationships of authors and publishers relating to their readership. However, while further statistical work could be performed on the economic considerations of the proposed model, as far as performance is concerned, the current nature of these textual and audience practices is clear: fans and writers create new value around texts, it is up to the authors and publishers to best locate and utilise it. It is the extent to which publishers can recover their business from technological distributors and marshal audience attention to branded sites remains in question.

The textual ecology model of author / writer along with seed and branch texts enables a more sophisticated discussion of the ebook and book publishing, by better reflecting the realities of both the digital distribution and interaction of texts. In conjunction with a broader definition of not only the form of a book text, but the interactions of actors around it, this study has aimed to identify what is involved in developing new ebook business in synchronistic, but divergent paths to the pbook industry.

There are certainly existing experiments looking at similar areas, such as measuring the social reading relationships amongst users of sites such as Smashwords, or Cursor and Red Lemonade (www.thinkcursor.com; <http://redlemona.de/>)—all of whom experiment with exploring a kind of free written text / social attention to new-seed loci and sales externality model. However, both rely more on crowdsourcing, rather than being a publisher-led form. Whilst this may indeed be the future, these sites do not

seem to challenge the more traditional notions of the author-writer-reader relations that I have identified as somewhat problematic here in my own research.

With this exegesis, I have explored ways in which we think about the book industry in the digital environment. How authors and publishers can make use of their skills and the new book forms, in order to meet diverse readerships and better leverage existing author and publisher functions to heighten new sales opportunities.

Digital distribution, along with the textual ecologies of seed and branch texts, offer new opportunities for book texts. It is not necessarily an end to pbook publishing, but a new avenue for growth. Digital distribution does not necessarily replace existing forms or publishing activities—it may *complicate* them—but should instead be seen as a complimentary system. While there is still work which could be done to develop other publishing models, I hope this exegesis has helped point to the ways in which new publishing models are emerging, and that my research and creative work shows the importance of exploring alternatives that will benefit and grow opportunities for both the publishing industry and authors alike.

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Legislation

Australia – United States Free Trade Agreement 2005

Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works 1986.

Copyright Act 1976 (United States of America), section 101.

Copyright Act 1976 (United States of America), section 103.

Copyright Act 1976 (United States of America), section 106.

Copyright Act 1976 (United States of America), section 109a.

Copyright Act 1976 (United States of America), section 203.

Digital Millennium Copyright Act 1998 (United States of America).

Lanham Act 2006 (United States of America), section 43(a).

Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

Bibliotek: a Novel

Metatext: *Inspiration* /ɪnspɪ'reɪʃ(ə)n/

noun

For other uses, see [Inspiration \(disambiguation\)](#).

A biological hallucinogen, *Inspiration* is a member of a large group of [eukaryotic](#) organisms including microorganisms such as [yeasts](#) and [molds](#) ([British English](#): [moulds](#)), as well as the more familiar [mushrooms](#). The different [genres](#) of *Inspiration* contain the psychedelic drugs psilocybin and psilocin in different quantities, as well as the unique chemical compound [bibliographin](#).

Unlike more common [fungi](#), *Inspiration* is considered to be both a relatively new organism (dating from the widespread distribution of [cellulose-rich parchment](#) and [paper bond bounds](#) and [scrolls](#)), but also a human [symbiont](#)[1].

[1]: **Parallel evolution of *Inspiration* in natural environments**

Sue Richards

Citation needed here, given there are [new studies exploring](#) previously “discounted” *Inspiration*-like organisms existing in the wild. While these biological agents do not show evidence of

...[MORE](#)

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Parallel evolution of *Inspiration* in natural environments ...[MORE](#)

Parallel evolution of *Inspiration* in natural environments ...[MORE](#)

Evidence of animal response to *Inspiration* ...[MORE](#)

Inspiration, along with select [bound](#) (see: [print books](#)) texts, affect human subjects with a variety of physiological and hallucinatory responses responding to the specific genre of its textual catalyst.

The agent is believed to have naturally developed in and around [libraries](#) and collections of ancient bounds, the biology of the fungi reflecting the textual nature of the material. It is hypothesised that *Inspiration* may in fact explain historical instances of intense creative and philosophical work, encouraging creators in drug-fuelled monomania.

The effects of *Inspiration* as a drug depend on its genre and catalyst text, but may include schizophrenic hallucinations, paranoia, euphoria, and significantly, feelings of intense inspiration[42]

[42]: **Weaponising *Inspiration*?** ... [MORE](#)

Common colloquial terms for the biological agent include *hunch*, *spark* and *muse*.

Discovered in 2019[2], *Inspiration* was considered a curiosity until the catastrophic [Dublin Incident](#) in 2024[3]. After the cleanup and quarantine[4: **Conspiracy**], *Inspiration* has been the main drive for the transition from “print” bounds and the uptake of the online [Metatext](#).

...

Chapter One

Graham

London — Hackney — Now

Graham looked back, tripping headlong down the uneven cobbled streets. They must be behind him, close to catching. But he could still get away! Turning right-ways, he twisted his ankle; of course, *Nothing is ever straight-edged in London*. Alleyways and boulevards broke into one another awkwardly, with the distant fog lamps flickering along those difficult pathways; to then cast shadows upon him like inverted spotlights. At least there were no clear sight lines in the city, either.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Each word punctuated by an exhalation. Tonight was the first he’d gone on a heist with the Collective and it had gone wrong. He knew he should have stayed back at the vault. Now he was on the run. He barely even knew where he was, seeing only slices of the city: stairs past black, wrought iron fences; the roller-shutters of shop fronts, beading in the damp air. His fear narrowed the city like a collapsing telescope—lens folding flush to lens—only leading, inextricably, back to their secret collection.

And finally. At the end of the street, to a close of Victorian tenements. His destination. He dashed against the deadlocked entrance, stopping only to batter at the array of antique buzzers set by the door. After his third try at the sequence, he pushed in past the green tiled hallway and barged past the blast baffle. It was still only a makeshift bolt-hole, but it’d have to be good enough.

Inside, the building had been hollowed away to hold their cache. Graham jogged past security doors, tapped consumer-grade access panels, leaving heat-prints on the glass from his sweaty palm strikes.

Then he was in the vault. Graham stopped there and settled amongst the scaffolding of the racks that were the collection.

Now wearing sleepless, bruised eyes, Graham looked around him; at the towering shelves of bounds—*printed* books—vac-packed and smelling only of the sharp, long-stringed polymers of their plastic baggies. Bond and leather sealed hermetically, safely

from the room. It calmed him.

The volumes—before the Collective had “rescued” them—had each been uniquely, digitally watermarked, identifiable by their full text content. Unlike an electronic book out free on the Metatext, bounds were unique. Perfectly traceable; unfenceable. The collection should have been impossible.

He was calm here, because this was where he was supposed to be. His job in the Collective: Data Security Architect. Describe the valuable bounds they’d stolen, define and catalogue them into that strange plural cache called a “library.” Describe them for those secret collections, but disguise them too. So yeah, the Collective might call it a “library,” but that was a misnomer; sure it was a collection of bounds, but then what true library let you actually touch the pieces? Libraries were more like private galleries, weren’t they?

This was the Collective’s gallery. Booby-trapped. The baffled hallways leading to the Victorian vault armed with shrapnel grenades, each with a payload of nano pellets: packed with allergens. Graham sweated cold from his prickling armpits—the Collective’s custom deodorants should keep him free of the red-eyes and razor-itches of the payload... Though he had never tested it himself.

Then inside. A temp-controlled interior. An ordinary block of terraces without, but inside, cement render inches thick. Now in the center of it all, a black void. The only light a dim reading spot shining from above.

The bounds they’d stolen were exquisite. From the carbon-composite covers and paper fibers so artily tangled they were stronger than quarter inch steel, to the oldest of illuminated manuscripts. It was the dragon’s horde: millions of Euros of precious paper bond held hostage under strong copyright. They should have been held by bankers or in law firms. Instead, Graham and the Collective had them.

The door was clamped closed behind him. It was the first time he’d gone on a heist with his co-conspirators, and it’d fucked up on him. Now he was locked in with their pirate bounds, and he didn’t think he was going to get back out.

During the previous hits it’d been his place to stay here at the vault and scramble the data if things went wrong. He’d designed their system, and it was his job to make sure it stayed secure. For even if the bounds were melted, the slag stuff left behind might

provide enough of a Rosetta key to decode their database; revealing their secret financiers and fences. He should have stayed and worked to corrupt what was left.

However, tonight he'd gone with them. Too often his colleagues had taken bounds they'd only had to burn; texts Graham couldn't code away, couldn't disguise, not even with deep quantum encryption. So as architect he'd gone along with them to help the procurement.

Now the door was on hard-lock. If it were opened, the thermite-stuffed shelving would be fired.

Yeah, he thought, I've made a fuck of myself. And this is where all fuck-ups get to—under six feet of soon-to-be deconstructed concrete.

Facing certain death, because his life had fallen apart.

Earlier that night, they'd taken a train to the hit. High on meta-phetamines—on ultra-caff—they sleeked through the tiled wet room of the London Underground. Graham had always believed that it brought blue, French pastoral china to mind—imagining the fuss of village life on the Tube. He had not thought to laugh as they waited.

They watched one train hurtle past; not enough passengers waiting at the platform for it to notice. When the last of their members came by, they sent msgs from their mobiles, each electing to pay the premium charge, so that the next train deigned to stop for them.

All very serious, the conspirators were dressed in tightly woven, hardwearing brand-fabrics; Burberry tweed and D&G logos linked together like micro-chains. Shades wore a fashionable jumpsuit zipped to her black throat. The others were in their own uniform styles. Graham stood amongst them in the mismatched blacks and grays of a community dramatist.

Commuters hung around them from virtual handholds, the straps no one else could see without their propriety glasses; AR interfaces keeping them abreast of the train-sway via haptic-gloves and inner-ear guesswork. *Bit gauche*, thought Graham, *Swaning around in their wrap glasses. The rest of us keep our Metatext out of other people's faces.*

Graham was the first to call their destination as they shuttled towards the stop. The

“Atrium Library,” as they’d come to call it. A collection and its shelves sandwiched precariously between glass, atop the Slate Holdings building, a free-standing hothouse fifty-two stories straight-up. The prize wasn’t just on show behind glass; it was suspended far out of reach upon it.

It wasn’t Graham’s job to get them in, or to get them out. The deal with the bubble-bridge? He didn’t know anything about it. It worked, that was all. Stretching from a looming sibling corp, they crawled through an extruded worm of bubble bath, emerging gunked and ready in plastic foam.

Inside. The room was all glass. There were no lights in the library. The bounds soaked hydroponically in canisters, protected from the elements, while the nu-glass of the house leached away any harsh radiation from the sun—or moon—beyond. In that light, the bounds were the lost library of the undead. Light, especially sunlight, was poison to them.

The Atrium also magnified and diffused cool moon and starlight to show the works off, making all softly lit. Stripped of its UV warmth, of IR glow—in the light of such a dying earth—the library was both ur-place and utopia: no place at all. Dancing on that glass, there were no rules but those of the bounds.

The magnificat of the starlight and green city phosphor pollution made for an odd effect—like that of a drug—drying Graham’s eyes. It produced a starred ring of refracted flaws in his gaze. Flaws that circled round the focus of his sight. On the bounds. He grinned. High.

The works on display were mainly trash romances and self-help prints. Those least likely to be properly bound, and thus the most valuable for it.

Oxygen burned paper—would kill anything it touched. Even frail Human bodies die, oxidising into rust. So some collectors held their bounds in nitrogen jars; but that made them hard to handle. This collector had his pieces in large, open vases. Submerged in demineralised water, the clean water bound to a new nanoparticle—strange technology that allowed the water to cushion the bounds, protected them, but could not get them wet. *Paper—bond—books—bounds in water! Madness.* Graham thought of how strange it was to see those traditional, paper bounds in water.

Graham gingerly plucked a copy of a rare, orchid-growing text in his gloves; held

his breath as he did so, though he had seen its safety certification himself. He'd done his research this time, and pointed out all the most desirable bounds to have. Rich, safe bounds. The water splashed from the tank, hitting the floor, and spun on the glass as if on a hot griddle.

The heist may have gone differently if they'd not taken him so seriously. *Oh to be so damned...*

Graham had looked up, and wondered what they were after, with Shade's brother squatting covertly, shielding his accomplice—whom Graham called Bun—who eased short hair-pins from her do.

Graham was busy leaving a frictionless trail of drops when he asked them over his shoulder:

“Guys?” And dropped the bound. “Damn it! What is that you're drilling?”

The hair-pins weren't just for fashion, they were actually cores of the new plastic nitro, which the two literally hammered into place like soft iron nails, filling the holes they'd drilled into the glass floor. That was when he noticed the others, and their own ad hoc measures.

He'd cautioned them mainly on digital security... on how best to re-write data and identity, the way he'd always wished to speak of data to his students; but he'd also quizzed them on DNA. Had said that yes, their gene IDs were known—yes, the police knew who they all were. But that didn't mean the Collective had to make it easy for them. At least give them a challenge in putting the evidence together.

They were hammering the putty into place, each strike accompanied by crowns of distorted light in the queer gloom of the room, as seen through his drugs.

He'd *meant* they should use gloves, of course, and to take hard showers with a good scrubbing brush before a hit. That was all.

Instead, they were going to toast the place.

Graham hadn't ever rained down from a volcano, not till they base-jumped from the tower amongst the explosive thermals which smashed them down toward the street. Shades had thrown him something like a poncho and told him, “It knows what to do.” *Blessed fashion*, he thought, *At least it knows what to do. Lead us on our way.* He had no

idea. But when his buddy in the chain jumped, he was dragged from the sagging, molten window after them.

Around him it appeared as if the fires were airy-sparks, or lazy pixies... but the hot beads, in a hail recoiling from the street, were actually drops of dense, molten glass.

It wasn't long after they'd landed, running away on loose paving, that slogans began to fall upon them. Cut-ups, slips of bond spelling doom. Graham couldn't help but read prophesy into the confetti they'd made of the bounds left behind in the explosion. On the embers of their own op-ed, the slogans of their refuse caught alight. Out in the cold they were recalcrescent. Like fire behind the stove-front's glass.

Graham could not unclench his jaw from the cocktail of drugs. Running through Bank, he knew what must happen. He'd heard of the book hunters, the license killers. But when did they ever appear? *Well*, he thought, *They're going to show now*.

Graham wondered if those hunters had been changed—modified—to tackle the unique demands of the bounds: Pavlov-trained to respond to the sound of turning pages, equipped with special hands to hold the bounds... *Page-turning hands*, he thought. *With fine fingers like razor blades fitting between the sheets of bond*.

Running away, he knew that they'd taken Bun. He'd heard her squeal—or had that been a truck screeching round the corner? He could imagine her entrapment, but hadn't actually seen it. Perhaps he was wrong? Maybe she'd gotten away after all? But he still had a job to do. They hadn't been stupid enough not to plan for a disaster; they each had their bolt-holes.

Except that Graham was new on the hit. He should have known better than to take on two roles—robber and data guardian. He had no choice but to run back to the vault, and in doing that, to lead anyone following him to their secret collection.

It wasn't precisely suicide. He could have taken one of the tunnels out, leaving burning white phosphor behind him while the bounds fused together. Their precious database of metadata had already begun harvesting seasons of random numbers. That would melt, too. But better to be safe.

He looked around the collection. The wires showed bare. He'd never been in an actual library—not in the sense that Shades had described; rhapsodising from long lost secondhand sources—but he didn't think they ever would have looked like this. Hell!

Not like either of the night's sets—Collective, nor Atrium.

The shelves were a magnesium tubing packed with thermite powder. They were wrapped in plastic sheeting, and the bounds were dumped in tubs.

Still, he didn't bother to put on the requisite latex gloves as he took up the last bound—the orchid text he still carried, wrapped tightly in its plastic memory-cling. The leaves each as exquisitely textured as a petal—he could almost feel the pulse of a living plant pressed within.

He took the chance to read it, his hands bare on the bond pages. What did he have to lose now? The work was a re-print of Darwin's *On the various contrivances by which British and foreign orchids are fertilised by insects, and on the good effects of intercrossing*. He had to imagine the words of the text lit in ozone blue, re-directing him to newer sources.

An after-thought of the concrete around the collection was that it insulated against noise, making it a calm amongst the racket of London. So all he could do was listen to the cricket-clicking of the hard drives wipe, hiding their work from any pursuer, as he waited for something, anything to happen. Turning another page. Wondering if he was under siege.

The Collective had proximity alarms installed, and they *did* sound, even if it *was* after the blast of the vault wall being breached. He never had time to check the drives were fully deleted. Instead, in the explosion of paper (and he had to assume, a debris of steel and concrete) he was spun—trailing his legs back behind him, like a flying squid—thrown against a stack of shelves, to sit and greet a new, smoking hole in the outer wall.

The smoke and ash grew arms and a torso. Then a whole body, wrapped mostly in thin strips of fine leather, eyes a-flash in glass, with pieces of torn bond caught afloat in his updraft. The man so revealed looked around. For Graham. He glinted, as he bowed:

“Professor Emlen at your service; Freelance Bibliometricist. You must come with me before the clerks come.” He had a hand out, had approached while Graham looked around from the floor in shock. “It's ok, Graham, but we've no time for these bounds,” he paused for a moment, “Did you have a favorite?” Emlen swaggered in a circle, inspecting the ruin. Away from the two men, the circuit of shelves had begun to hiss, flaring, telling them both that the vault door had been breached and that the thermite was

beginning to fire. The interloper shook his mottled leather head. “Well, maybe not.” He crouched low over Graham and offered him a hand. “You must come.”

Graham looked around. Wow. He realised then, rubbing his face as it ran with sweat in the heat of the newly flaring shelves, smearing his own oily skin with the flakes caught from burning bond—he knew then, that the ash of a bound was greasy like his own skin. Not dry, not gritty. The remains of a bound, its ink having melted into porous bond—was almost like burnt flesh. And he was glad to know it. It gave a meaningful poignancy to how he must mourn the collection.

Emlen nodded decisively and turned away. Graham followed him.

Nanograph One

Paris — Beneath the Rue Dauphine — Two Years Ago

No one had been down that hole, not since Hazmats had poured concrete over the contaminate some twenty-three years ago.

Most weren't as mad as she was. Under her inflatable bubble helmet, even Julia winced, trying not to think what the 'crete-eating goo she'd pumped over the biohazard seal could do to her lungs. She eased herself down the tunnel. Best to be safe. Thankfully, the bacterium had left nothing but a smooth drop.

Rappelling down, she considered the tip she was following; what her data miner hoped she'd find; that it might still be alive. There'd been other digs, on other sites, and some successes—but nothing like an undiscovered strain. Under the feet of these Parisians might be the most powerful organic since Acid. A whole new form of Inspiration. But not since she'd picked up one of the long lost Footnotes from an old Kremlin bunker had it been this difficult a job.

Her boots sank into an inch of liquefied concrete at the bottom, at the final seal.

She had to risk a tear in her gloves, picking fallen rubble from the way. When the tunnel broke open, her suit mic picked up the gasp of escaping gas.

Looking in, she knew the usual halogens were too strong for this work, so she went in with just her own eyes and an infrared film laid over the helmet bubble. As she entered, the slow goo of masticated 'crete gave way to a warm, false-colour room. There was something still alive. She could see it, in the crumbling walls of warm, soft yellows and red, where the organics ate hungrily into the stacked pads of cellulite. The old library was now just a bioreactor of paper and mold. That's exactly what she'd broken past the security for, what her employers wanted.

There were no titles or Writers there—nothing she could read anyway. Low light and heat vision only showed Julia the extent of the horde—reading it no more than she'd read the yeast in bread. From a precariously shifted shelf, she took a bound, stupidly huffing at it—though all her lungs got was the pale smell of recyc'd air. Good. She didn't want to be exposed.

She wasn't an addict herself. Not addicted to the bounds; to the very chemistry of them. She laughed wet exhalation into her mask! It's what she'd always sold; if only she had known it. Moulds and spores, grown in and around particular collections, bred amongst centuries of reader discernment. Mould that allegedly provoked the accentuated "enlightenment" of reading, so neatly explaining the addiction of bibliophilia. "Allegedly" inspirational; undoubtedly fucking you up.

And thanks to the publishing Houses and Librarians locking-up all the bounds, those classic highs had since truly gone underground. That opened up a new career for Julia. Selling the drug distilled from it was part chemistry, and part storytelling. Text and mould literally informing the other; histories come alive, and science sparked whilst huffing from a mouldy cloth. The genres of Inspiration had to be taken with certain text, or would not be satisfied, only burnt away.

*In this old tomb the infestation had taken root in the histories, and spread out to the literature section... to the world's first, true collection of the "new." The French *novelle*. It had taken a century to realise the desire for the collection was... wrong. Even then in the millennium, the authorities had only covered it up. Not until the call had come through from her miner, Clinton, had anyone thought more of it.*

Julia stepped around the old shelving. Surveying. Making sure nothing had been disturbed over the years. If anyone else had found this site, she may be in more danger than a lost commission. But she saw no signs of anyone having been there. No booby traps.

This would make her career. In the hedonistic otherworld of the printed bound—an addiction for only the Author junkies and bibliophilic hyper-rich—Inspiration was just another mark in making the bound a distasteful extravagance. The beauty of it was that those kind were always looking for a new high; and there were never enough genres of Inspiration... so this shouldn't upset the delicate balance of the powers. The House cartels and those damned militant Librarians: they'd love it. Both groups eating up even further rarefication of their bounds; caused by still more rumors of crime and drugs. As long as she helped by selling the high—well then, no one would come and ink her. As long as she kept their secret world of money and information safe.

She ran her scanner around the ruins of the library—wishing all along she could

wipe the damned bang of red hair from her face. Hair close enough to the lens of her eye that the gray was only refraction. The contaminate she was after should match certain criteria, but still spiral off on its own accord...

The way she'd gone into drug-running never had seemed that great a stretch. Of course, she'd had to retrain from antiquarian bookseller to high tech criminal—but how much of a shift was that really? All a part of being alive after the millennium. She knew how to look for that right type of binding, the right bound to have incubated a strain.

Her sensor “pinged.” Squinting through the IR overlaying the helmet, Julia saw the organic that had mouldered the collapsed bounds into a stubby stalagmite. Approaching it gingerly, she stopped and considered. She didn't want to break open the crust. But then, that was what she was getting paid for.

“Shit.” She took the drill from her utility belt. Dormant Inspiration had been known to explode on being tampered with; Julia had seen the scars on another poor tome raider. That bastard had been so gone—poisoned by it—he'd fallen into an anaphylactic shock when not reading in his genre.

This one ruptured softly to the touch. Inside, the gills of the overgrown mushroom did nothing but resemble the pages of a dusty bound. She scraped the spores away, directly, safely into resin, and stood whilst letting it set. As she waited, she took her time in choosing where to place the thermals.

Climbing back up the tunnel was hell on her knees. Christ! Hopefully she wouldn't have to commit many more of these ridiculous digs. As exciting as they were, the last one had finally paid off the equipment, and so this one should be the pay dirt.

At the head of the tunnel, Julia threw in the last of the burn grenades, quickly spraying thick foam capping behind her. She rushed away.

Later, into the mobile, she said, “Sundancer here,” and grimaced, never having grown into her codename, “I've located the Narrative.”

The voice on the other end of her blank screen—blank, though she could well imagine the man's damned, neon-ringed goggles—told her briefly, “Then deliver it to our Writer for Ransom.” Julia felt as if she could see his glasses flashing eagerly. And went cold. So, the job wasn't done yet... could they really want to weaponise it after all?

Chapter Two

Graham

London — Hackney — Now

“I seem to have misplaced a bound, you see.”

Emlen and Graham squeezed through the hole torn in the ‘crete of the vault wall, its steel joists raw as bare, frayed bond, falling into the blank alleyway behind. Emlen, Graham saw, had a gun by his hip, along with many tools wrapped tightly in binding leather. Graham was chilled, the drugs having leached away from his veins into cold piss inside. Emlen was swift, and walked away, leaving Graham to doggedly follow after. The stranger had obviously planned his obscure exit; taking them confidently around corners, in amongst twisted intersections, and by a tangle of streets not clipped to any CAD grid. The alleyways and avenues pointed accusingly at them as they tried to escape, but had no chance to capture them. They went by streets faced with roller-shuttered shops, closed like blank drug labs, lit saffron by fog-lamps now worthless in the modern city’s tekno-tropics. Dripping, plopping, acoustic in its long, wetland season. Together the men glowed an aggressive, chill orange, and Graham chanced a look back.

“No! No. Don’t worry about the... killers, yes? They’re just *clerks*—far less a concern than you’ve been led to believe,” Emlen snorted. Adding to himself: “Ill-trained brutes.” Everything about Emlen was quiet, restrained; all except his attire, manner, and his... “everything!” Graham followed him, and his shoe leather, having cracked in the earlier fire, snapped sharply. Then came a loud fizzing from behind them, and Graham knew that the old bricks of the collection must have fired—that the ‘crete insulation inside the tenement had melted—and the moisture, once caught inside the clay bricks, had sublimated like sherbet in vinegar and now chanced its escape. He thought of swirling pop rocks with ginger. The soda fizzing round the sugar grit. Shit. He didn’t want to be near the wreck of it, or the mutant bodies of the killers—the “clerks” as Emlen had called them—the monsters he imagined must have been trapped in the vault behind them. He tried not to think about the modified clerks, or their twisted, formaldehyde-soaked bodies raw by fire. Crushed by twisting steel girders in the heat.

Every breath he took had a burnt edge—even after he'd managed to choke away his own charred nostril hair.

“You blew up our collection!”

Emlen looked back at him brusquely, “I did not. I only took advantage of your own defences—meager as they were, I might add. It was already burning when I got there, the clerks had followed you back and were breaking in as I arrived,” he finished with a great pout. Emlen continued through the uncertain geometries of London, striding ahead, while Graham ran ragged to keep up with him.

It was a welcome respite from running when they mainlined downward into the Manor House Tube station. Graham tried to look back at the street one last time, but saw nothing except the glow of fire in the sky. They descended, to be deafened by the coarse wind of the wild underground that blew up from the escalator, a passage itself flooded with twists of refuse from below. Then they heard nothing. No pursuit. Further down, past the hovercraft fans—still now, but which in summer would push the waste and human stink into a then incendiary city—it was only the push and the pull of the trains that rushed the air.

They walked through the platform, triangulated and flashed by security cams, checking their faces against mobile ownership.

Emlen's glowing glasses offered little defense versus the cams, however, they were just too gross a modification of his face—the systems adept at compensating for likely changes to his avatar. Looking after Emlen, Graham didn't know what to think of him. Should the man remind him of a wild old radical: a man who might've argued an intrinsic value to privacy? That seemed natural, dressed as he was like a cyber-Davy Crockett. But he didn't act like that at all. Graham watched as Emlen held his hand aloft, his mobile shuddering and flashing in his hand, hailing them a train.

“Ok, so what, you've lost a bound? You're actually telling me you're—what? Some kind of a ‘librarian?’” The term was uncertain on Graham's lips, but he knew other members of the Collective used it—sparingly. Emlen wrinkled his nose at that, and then took them off to the Central line. Twenty feet straight down—as the crow fell. Emlen hurried them down the teathed steps of the escalator's left lane.

“Oh yes. What a bugger,” he laughed bitterly. “I track select bounds around the

world, you see. By reference, credit-tracking, GPS, even by radio-chip if I must. I find the cultural capital inherent in bound trafficking fascinating—originally I came at it from a zoological background, of course. Tagging birds, developing migration maps. It's all of a same," he waved his hand grandly. But Graham only felt himself zone away from Emlen's mania, remembering art lectures from college; now whatever Emlen said was just like those random words—those lectures. He followed, as Emlen had them stepping straight aboard a train.

"I had an isolated bound to track. Wholly divorced from its electronic source text, so that it would be especially attractive to collectors. Not only for the artifact, but for the knowledge itself, trapped inside." On the train he didn't sit, but stepped up the car and poked through damp rubbish. There, he found a paperback bound, and flickered through it—half-closed, as if nauseatingly able to read along the curve of its spine.

Graham wrinkled his nose while he watched Emlen, stepping as far from him and the bound as he could, whilst still staying in the car. "Ok," he said, after much too long a wait. But it wasn't. Graham wasn't sure anything would ever be right again.

Emlen didn't seem to notice Graham's pause, looking far too engrossed in the grotty paperbound he held. He was taking notes on it, *By pencil, on a paper pad!* Graham shook his head in disgust.

They did not stay on that train long; the two sitting at a stop until the very last chime, and then Graham rushing after Emlen, as he bolted, and both squeezing themselves through the closing doors. They almost literally jumped trains, as they ran onto the last two bells at the next platform.

Resting again, Emlen continued, apparently having remembered he was explaining himself: "I used to be a zoologist, an ornithologist—" he started, "No, that's not important now," and shook his head. Then he took an impossibly deep breath, and began again: "Years ago, I was accused of murdering another scientist. Jess Dovaston. We had been close, but not so close I'd have killed her in a fit of passion. That's what the police said happened. But I couldn't understand why anyone else would have killed her either. Not until I managed to check her affects. That's when I saw the truth of it. Her new manuscript was missing. It had been print-only, a proof of concept she had bound herself, no one could have known about it—except those closest to her. Not even the

police. And I knew that had to be it—she had been so excited about the new work—and it had been her death.” A sigh, deflated at that last.

“Whoever killed her had wanted her book. I tried tracking the bound, hoping to find her killer. But the thief had done something to it—changed it—a little like you have, with your Collective’s bounds, but so much more. They weren’t hiding just one copy, and not just the research, but also every reference to it. Vanished. Utterly. Wherever it is now, if I can find it, then I can track it all the way back to her killer.

“I’ve been on the run, trying to prove my innocence, ever since.”

Graham stilled. “Wait, Emlen, stop!” He did, looking back at Graham, as if to question why, but Graham beat him to it. “How can that work?” *That didn’t sound real...* he thought. *Is that how I sound when I talk about my book? Lost. Even fake?*

“They stole Jess’ bound because it was unique... Well, think of it like mating, then—reader-to-reader—you’re careful whom you pass your genes to, aren’t you? You must think it through very carefully. So, too, a bound is like sex; the way you pass it around is just as careful. There’s a genealogy to it; a family tree.”

Graham guffawed, “Whereas a digital book is like a man sowing his wild oats?”

Emlen shook his head in tired humour, as he led them again across the platform from one train to another, but this time, more languidly. He even stooped to beam a micropayment to a flautist, busking in the tunnel. He did not dispute the analogy to casual sex, however, and continued, “So no, it’s not ok. I lost it. This bound, my one chance, I’d made it very close to her work—which was also close to your own—” Graham started at that, *What does he know about me?* But Emlen didn’t appear to notice him, continuing, “To try and to snare the same man, or his associates... so that even if I couldn’t catch him at it, then maybe I could still follow this new bound, to discover the man. But I lost it! It’s been changed—just like Jess’, like yours’. There’s more going on here than I thought. So now, I need you.”

Right, so this was the start of the scam, wasn’t it?

Emlen removed his goggles, as if trying to reveal a sincerity, which would otherwise have been hidden by the glass. “I need you, because we’ve both lost works important to us. But in your case, we still have access to the Author himself.”

“Why am I so unlucky? Swindles, hacks...” Graham took a moment for his sweet

self-pity.

“Unlucky, or working on the wrong material,” said Emlen, just too softly for Graham to properly catch.

“What? No, don’t bother. I need a drink after this talk. I’ll buy you one too, Emlen. That’s it though, I don’t understand what the fuck this is about, and I want out.”

“Wait. Graham. I need you. People died to get me that last bound, it was developed under anonymous patronage, and it’s had a terribly high cost.”

“Shit, Emlen,” Graham rounded on him, “Are you dealing with Ransoms? Tell me. I’m already on the run from the ninjas—clerks—whatever—and you want to get me involved with that? I need a real drink now.”

Graham didn’t really know what a Ransom was, though he feared the word. All he knew was that the faculty he worked for had been very strict on warning their academics off them; against them selling their books on the black-market. Wasn’t that the worst crime a writer could perform? Making their book “disappear”?

He remembered the first time he’d seen those mysterious figures in deep purple, rummaging around the office of a colleague who’d gone missing in action, presumably having run after making a Ransom. “Lucky bastard,” they’d all said, but Graham always had a bad feeling about it.

Emlen shook his head. “It won’t come to that. Not for you. You know your own book, if there were a bound of that—and I have evidence that there were art copies made—then we could follow the trail of the edits... you could tell us precisely what was changed in your work—in your book, and that’s how we could crack their code, leading us right back to whoever stole it—maybe, right back to my own lost bound, and to Jess’ killer. I could still make something from your misfortune.” Graham thought of this new “misfortune,” how the night had changed everything—stealing bounds might’ve been like robbing the Royal Mail, or more aptly, stealing from the King’s Cache—but the law would call the events of this night terrorism.

He knew that Emlen couldn’t tell why he laughed.

“Graham, work with me. If we can find a bound copy of your book, maybe I can figure out how the other was lost.”

“I’m laughing because—I don’t know, because what you’re offering, it’s what I

wanted. To find my bound. And I'm scared of all that." Then, without missing a beat, "Are you sure there are bound copies?"

"Yes. Yes I am."

Well, Graham was just the straight man to that joke—though he knew it must be a scam. "You'd help me find the actual published bounds?"

"And write you a paper to make them famous. We don't even have to go near illegal publishing. You just tell us where to start."

Sitting at the Old Queen's Head after two pints of Hobgoblin, an ale sweet as if mixed with wine and then boiled flat, Graham waited on Emlen bringing them another round.

I should never have let Shades talk me into this. But what choice did he have? Plenty, I guess, and I still made this one.

He had been sitting in a sparse theatre, watching a performance by gorgeous college dance students, and she had approached Graham to join up with the Collective. The dancers on the stage had appeared uncomfortable; in a contemporisation of classical Indian Bharatanatyam, where they stamped harshly against the stage but also leapt lightly like ballet. Their contempt of the Earth given a direct statement by their striking, dry feet—clapping the wood throughout the performance, as if coming from an audience unsure of when to stop applauding. Graham related to their struggle. He may once have been a Writer, but his romantic entanglement with language was in debt to his struggle against it. To write, without having the betrayal of then being "interpreted."

"Graham. We've been watching you." The girl waiting for him at the performance—ambushing him—was in mirror shades. Glasses he would later learn were polarised against blank white page-flare. In fact, he would come to think of her just as that, "Shades" —just as the other members of the group would call her—though she introduced herself as Jada. "We have a proposal for you. One that may interest a man of your... particular interests." "*Obsessions*," perhaps? He was ready to listen to her then, because he didn't know what else to do.

He'd first noticed something wrong when a student—to his embarrassed horror—had approached him at a party and congratulated him on his work—not on his *teaching*, but on his actual books! She wanted to discuss his theory. He'd thought he was safe

there, amongst his older colleagues. He'd wanted to be alone in his misery, with just those friends who wouldn't care. Graham had had enough of attractive girls when he'd still been a star. Even then, a drunken, gushing theory girrrl should not have been a problem, though as he took her on, cutting her down, she'd said, "But haven't you already disproved that? You can't actually believe it! In fact, I know you don't. That isn't what you said." Sure... he could admit to himself that he might've changed his mind since his book—but he'd never yet said anything like that publicly! She wanted him to admit he had.

"No, I haven't said any such thing." But then the girl had quoted "himself" back, pulling up the text of his book on her feeder to prove it. He hadn't recognised a word.

He had stood in front of a class not long after, watching his students on their feeders, having an examined reading. He watched the wave of their arguments and their annotations as they each deformed the living reading of the Metatext. There were a couple of other Writers online at the time—and he'd wished briefly they were a part of his class, they had great stuff to offer. It was to be expected that readers would write their own part of the 'text—how could they not? Cheap feeders were everywhere: in classrooms, of course; in cafes and on the Tube; wherever the Houses had subsidised them to encourage readers to sign-in with their own subscriptions. Even the cheap flexies lying on hairdresser's waiting room tables. Everyone read; everyone wrote. Whatever they thought of the texts, whatever they wanted to add. That was how the Metatext had taken over the old Internet; Google and Facebook in an unholy union of contextual, socialised knowledge. Don't like the text as written? Well, take what your friends, or other highly recognised Writers, had written instead.

But whatever he'd written himself was supposed to be his own. Graham was sacrosanct.

He'd discovered his last book had been rudely wiki'd. Some fuckwit who'd thought to write him in a eulogy; to proclaim his own research dead and done. So they had decided to "collaborate" with him. Yeah, ok, that was modern publishing. But when he'd gone to download his own work, instead, there were new, peculiar edits. Might not have even been noticed by any other reader, but Graham knew those weren't his words! Someone had snuck in and edited what he'd written. And he'd had no say in it. Worse,

his publishers liked the newly vandalised edition more than his original. His readers just didn't notice.

He'd then committed academic suicide, by demanding his own—now admittedly anachronistic—book. And only that. Ok, the wiki'd corrections were good, correct even, but couldn't they have left it to him to admit his own errors? Or at least to log the changes that they'd made? But he couldn't get anyone to care. He just wanted to write—God help him—and not be so grossly interpreted.

Damn it! They weren't supposed to have taken the book away from me. Graham found it hard to admit, but it was all he'd had left. Of course he'd fought back: defacing publishing sites, attempting to seed his own virii within copies of his own, now defaced book. But nothing worked.

Instead, he had been ostracised, having tried to question the crowd-surfed wisdom of the Metatext. His publishers hadn't been too happy at that, the readers didn't care or had pitied him, and the Writer's Guild couldn't back him—they'd taken long enough to ratify the Wiki Recognition Agreement as it was.

When he'd claimed that it was immoral that he had been edited, Graham had been told he was being “selfish and hubristic.”

He hadn't taken that lying down. He had organised petitions (which no one had signed), and took on mildly disastrous legal actions. He thought he had just been ignored. But, it seemed that someone had noticed him—the same way he had later noticed those dancers' ambivalent desire for words.

At the Indian dance, Jada sat to his left, a little behind him, but leaning forward into his row. Turning her nose from a tepid splash of scentless sweat, thrown so elegantly by a passing dancer, the two of them started to talk business. They spoke over the dance, as if over a bad film. It wasn't as if what they said would interfere with any dialogue, but still, Graham had felt like grunting arrhythmically to disrupt the dancer's timing. Exclaiming it in misplaced spite.

“Sure. What's it?” He spoke in numb short hand, as he leant off kilter away into the woman's blind spot—against the fourth wall of the performance—to secrete the plastic martini cup of his drink from her sight. He still wanted her to take him as

seriously as she could.

“Call us the PLC—Print Liberation Collective. We’re freedom fighters, we liberate cultural artifacts from the rich for everyone to read. It’s a splinter group of the old Printer’s Union, but we’ve moved on from that. We take the fight on in a different way.” Everyone knew the main gist of the Collective’s argument: the Collective felt that electronic books were de-humanising, “Alienating man from the production of meaning.” How anachronistically Marxist! Graham would never have agreed with the Collective before... but now he knew better. His book had been all he’d had left—and now what?

But the rich had their own privileges; bounds nicer than any a plebe was likely to buy. Proper books for the truly wealthy. Printed on hi-tech / hi-res paper, ur-leather bindings and chem-treated alloy clasps. Editions certified clean of *Inspiration*, signed and numbered with plates, each inked and bound with the Writer’s DNA. It was a valuable sideline for the Houses, too.

“We steal them, Graham. Break into the private libraries of the rich, Robin-Hooding the bounds like guerrilla librarians.” Graham had looked blankly at her. He knew the words, but not how they were using them. The Collective would eventually have to explain what it was they meant by a “library” to him later on. Even before the Houses had come over with their strong licenses and scare campaigns—meaning that most cheap bounds had to be returned for a part-refund, and that if you wanted a real binding you’d have to pay a premium for it. Even before that, libraries were passé. They were a rich man’s joke, like a “reading room.”

Shades shook her head, “We’re stealing the true “books” from the rich—they’ve been taking away our history for too long. Like they’ve done to you. Turning what you knew into nothing but ephemera. We’ve got funding for this collection, and enough to make it public, Graham! You shouldn’t ask where the money’s coming from—best not to—but we need someone like you to help us build it.”

“I don’t understand,” he had tried to form it as a question, but couldn’t. Tried again, “Why me? Why all this secrecy?”

“God! Weren’t you a Writer, Graham?” asked Shades. “There’s big business in publishing, didn’t you know? The Metatext, it runs everything. It may be imaginary, but

then, so is money. It's a whole other world of property people can control—can surveil—and also like money, like the stock market, it needs confidence to run properly... that's why the bounds are such a threat, why our library is so difficult, so dangerous, if the books—if the bounds—disappear, then you have a secret power. Knowledge is power, so the Metatext is an arms race to encourage total access. Because if some people have offline knowledge, then the whole thing collapses. And no one will invest in the 'text then.'"

Money. Power. Danger. That's why the Collective had been secret. They had been Metatext terrorists.

And their argument wasn't just pissing against the rich. Graham considered himself: he used to write info theory, digital down to the quick. He thought, *I never expected to own the rights to my work—it was for the ages...* but his tragedy was he still believed in his IP, it was the product of his intellect after all. So he was already at odds with the Meta-loving-world.

Paper bounds were made to argue those property rights. They proved true *Authorship*—not just who'd be a part of writing them—bounds were history. But was that fair, shouldn't books be free for all on the Metatext? Best to go that way, wasn't it? And the reader's demographic data making the trillion Euro Metatext go round...

He knew it was best that way. Still, at halftime, Graham stood with Shades and left with her. He'd started to think that maybe they could help one another—even if the PLC were likely insane.

He met the rest of Shade's PLC cell in a building that had once been used to house an old press. Their first base of ops—not yet the grand Victorian vault. He was given an introduction to their first few bounds. They'd placed their collection in the tubs that had once been used to pulp paper. He knew that wouldn't do at all. Thankfully, it hadn't taken much to disabuse them of the romantic notion of laying low in such a poetic, yet obvious hiding place.

One of them was even in competition for the alias "Shades"—imagine, bifocal work goggles, the lower lens mirrored in the same style. That man, named Samanya, had seemed to be winking at Graham infrequently from his disco-shades. Brother to Jada, Graham figured the two of them must also share fashion hints.

Next to him, a girl named Christy Cho. She wore her black hair up, ninja-“shushing” style. While the leather pencil skirt was obviously an affectation, her hair in the bun seemed like a genuine disregard. She pushed in past everyone else, reaching for the bounds, and obviously displeasing Shades.

“Most of this stuff,” Cho had gestured, the bounds lumped on the tables, “Are just common texts—recyc’d bounds from airport Espresso machines and other throw-away, in-situ texts. They’re just for the grassroots libraries. Pulp’s pirate from their copywrit—now illegal copies, having out-stayed their thirty day lifespans.” Shades gave a look to her brother, who pulled Cho—Graham would come to call her “Bun”—away from the bounds while they then let Graham scour for copies of his own works. But even in their shallow disobedience, no one would maintain his kind of data-architectural thesaurus. He felt weak. Was this where he’d really ended up?

The bounds were un-shuffled, and many of them only heavily barcoded, not even with one passive, shortwave radio-tag between them. No one was tracking those pitiful things, *God help them!* There was nothing there worth any danger to the illegal Collective. Though that would have to change, wouldn’t it?

“We want a lot more than this, Graham,” Shades back in charge, “We need you to design a system for us.” They’d said they wanted their collection to rage against convention.

However, after meeting them, he’d thought of them less as radical militants, and rather more like old-fashioned bibliophiles. As if they were truly rich and in love with the bounds themselves. Not that he considered himself revolutionary either, but their insistence on taking and keeping the bounds in those almost fetishistic shelves... open-faced to the walkways... suggested that what they really loved was the print itself. That wasn’t like him. He wanted more from the group.

Yet they had been able to work together. While it hadn’t been easy to get the collection to where it was, it had grown. And eventually led to the disastrous heist.

Graham looked up from his thoughts, out around the Queen’s Head, suddenly aware of his predicament. He tried to pick out which of all those drinkers could be readers: whoever might be a danger to them, to *him*, on the lookout for terrorists who had been

stealing their books. Publishing was a big business, and he knew that there must be many in the pub who'd have a sideline in re-writing text. It changed people.

What had reading done to that woman in the blue, for example? Her cultured nails tapped around her mobile; clipping in non-spoken punctuation. The partner on her left, jiggling to her sub voce rhythm. Manner coded not through contextual syntax, but by string grammar. Language and not mere inflection. And across from her, their other friend, lacking in their subtext, who urged into speech where he wasn't wanted.

Who could be watching Emlen and himself, and what did they see?

He wondered about the... clerks: did they even read anymore? "Read" like the drinkers here would, or did they parse instead? Text as machine code. Would they interrupt rudely in conversation, but be elegant by text?

Like my teenage memories of flirting via instant msg.

Graham looked at people playing on the Metatext itself, tapping on the flashing electronic wallpaper of the pub's walls, betting on a Writer racing other Writers to complete a book—gamblers cashing-in on the subsequent readership rights; others writing straight into political debates for an upcoming election—tweeting their opinions, hollering when the candidate responded real time.

Pubs weren't the same anymore—according to Graham's Dad, at least—quieter than they used to be. No one shouting over the roar of football on TV, or keying in a track on the "juke"—it was so much more focused on the 'text.

And drinking. When Emlen returned with his pint, Graham downed it in one, then asked, "It's dangerous, isn't it? Publishing. I knew what we were doing in the Collective was illegal—even if it was all more of a lark—"

The other man laughed softly at that, "It was mostly a joke, what you were involved in, I've seen far worse. But you might have been on to something..."

Graham waved that—rather ambiguous—praise away, "But it's more than just that, isn't it? People live and work on the 'text, if it collapsed, there would be chaos."

Emlen nodded at that.

"I never put it together, before," said Graham, "What people might do to control it. Or break it. But I've seen it before, at a performance after I went solo from *Word Play*..." He almost blushed revealing that nugget, but when Emlen said nothing, Graham

continued on as fast as he could, holding back a grimace, “In the mosh pit below the stage, two reps, they pulled knives on each other and one of them was stabbed. I never really understood what it’d really been about, but could that have been publishers fighting over me as a Writer?” The man in the pit had been cut up quite badly, and even after so many years, Graham could still see the other mouthing, “That’s your warning.” It had affected him so much at the time, that on a then famous bootleg of the performance, under the layering of many tracks, you could still isolate his own dub: “That’s your warning,” as Graham had foolishly matched the aggressor out loud.

“Not from the Houses,” said Emlen, “They would have been Agents. But your point holds true, they would have been fighting over you.”

Graham shook his head slowly, “I was worth millions at the time, my Writer shares were sky-rocketing... How didn’t I know they were fighting over me?”

“Agents tend to try and shield their ‘delicate’ creatives from the harsh technicalities of the business. However, my guess is that as an academic, you’d never actually have dealt with an Agent at all—it would have been hidden from you, as a part of your collective bargain—also, you were likely in your own specialist, solipsistic bubble all along.”

Graham laughed—perhaps in self-pity—because that was all long gone. Still, he thought, *I’ve been called egocentric before now, but now I guess it’s all true.* He was—had been—important.

He had been a success. A huge success. Readers had finally taken him seriously after *Word Play*.

Until he’d been swindled of his money, and the fame had gone with it. Locked out of the big time, he’d spent years trying to recapture those heights, writing new books—truth be told, it had always been that same book—to prove he’d really deserved it. Until his most recent work had been hacked, taken from him and moved on, then he’d really lost it all.

Then the Collective came along. Now Emlen. *Maybe it’s not too late for me after all.*

Nanograph Two

Undisclosed Location — Two Years Ago

The unnamed man, in his absurd, neon, owl-like goggles, turned from his call.

“It seems to be progressing as it should,” he said of the call. Then looked down at Andy, who shivered—both at the calculating look, as well as his withdrawals. “Now tell me about his symptoms.”

Andy closed his eyes tightly, then, as his eyes spasmed, attempting to read words that were not there in the air before him. It was nauseating; the muscles in his ocular cavities, throwing his perspective left-to-right, left-to-right.

The nurse, Lindsay, who watched over him, replied, “Andy is a part of the control group, he’s been given the ‘Gothic’ strain of Inspiration, and shows more or less a physiological response to being denied genre-relevant text—depending on how long it is since we’ve doped him.”

“Compared to the Writers?” asked the man.

“Mild,” said Lindsay. “If they aren’t allowed to write, then they quite literally howl. Given the opportunity, their writing stats almost go off the charts.” She knelt down to Andy, and prised open his right eyelid, flashing her pen light into his eye. He couldn’t move, not after he had been restrained earlier—probably in preparations for the man’s visit.

This was the worst job he’d ever had, but at least they provided him with the fix. A very underhanded dealing.

Not that he could blame them, after he had attacked an orderly, who’d been taunting him with a feeder of Frankenstein.

“You can’t trust Inspiration,” the man in goggles again, “I wish I’d never heard that phrase.” Andy knew it well, he’d seen it all over his art school, the year after they’d

lost Dublin to the outbreak. A city mooning over the hero from an old Gothic strain—the same he was on now—it was called the “Heathcliff Event.” That was the turning point, after the burials, after the institutionalisations, that the Houses had stepped-in to save everyone with their abstinent “e-books”—and took over what became the Metatext while they were at it. “If people weren’t so afraid, we’d have this research already.” The man tried to smile down at Andy, but it didn’t seem so sincere.

Andy had his own problems just then, as another flash hit him. This was bad—not as bad as when they’d given him a contemporary novel, and his system had rejected it, but bad—his body went rigid, as he feared life, like a bad book, might not wrap up so neatly.

He distantly heard the man laugh. One grunt. “Give him a text, then, I’ve seen enough.” Andy let out a shrieking laugh, yes! Twisting eagerly in his restraints. “Then let him go.” Wait, no, they couldn’t cut him off from the Gothic, could they? “The testing must move on to the next stage, before we can measure it with the Narrative, and release it.”

The man turned once, to look back on Andy, and then left.

Chapter Three

Graham

London — Bank — Now

It was an hour later in the pub, and Graham wrote with a napkin and a pencil. He only had the pencil with him for the sake of the Collective, because they'd liked to make cryptic field-notes in their bounds. Weird. Though he must admit, there was something about hand-copying text; in drawing writing, like a computer might. They'd said it was to keep an offline catalogue—and that's why he wasn't on his mobile now, not screaming into it, and was sucking down his beer instead. He had to stay off the grid.

Graham hadn't hand "written" anything without predictive text in years, and he was still smudging it with the heel of his sweaty hand as he made his list. He printed tensely while Emlen got them more drinks, again. The truth was, he had barely drunk anything at all, and it already felt as if he'd received his hangover—or it could have been the sword hanging indolently above his head. Once he'd made the brief list, Graham waited for Emlen anxiously.

He had his mobile from his pocket, even before he could think it—its stream of apps informing him of local traffic conditions and of "suspicious individuals"—normally so comforting—now tracking him for his own convenience. Graham and Emlen were back closer to the hit on the Atrium now, having doubled and tripled back, now guys were coming in from the street, shaking ash off like rain.

Emlen came back with their drinks, ale in laminated pint glasses. Still looking at his mobile, Graham thought to ask:

"How do you hide from the authorities, Emlen?"

"The same way you lot did," he shrugged, "Anything offline is inferably illegal. You leave your mobile off, you're suspect—you can't even hail a train, instead, you'd have to buy a ticket." Emlen quirked his brow at that. "No one has any reason not to carry anymore. I know, when anything you've ever done has been public, it's strange to disconnect yourself. But there are ways to reclaim your privacy. I just leave my mobile behind, Graham. I fully embrace that anything I do without one is suspicious."

“Pretty simple. Yeah, we did that, had our mobile-drops—but—no offence, my lot, or the lot of the Collective—they’re a bit behind the times. I thought maybe you’d have something more...” Graham grinned.

Emlen leveled at him, “Sometimes I do.” And he shook his head, taking the napkin over from Graham, “‘Copperplate’ Ariel.” He looked up at Graham briefly, as if impressed. Continued, “So what’ve we got here?”

“Only a few avenues,” said Graham. “Top is an old colleague of mine: Ned Kenworth. The two of us were in the Security faculty at London Collage. I’d only just finished my thesis on *Naming Conventions in Ephemera*, it was a management study in psycho-social responses to environment; what the impact of subconscious titling—”

“I know your bibliography, Graham,” he broke in, “Tell me about Ned.”

Oh! Graham blushed, how nice that he knew of it—Citation Tracker had never shown him anyone reading it. Covering his pleasure with the last, mouthwatering gulp of beer, he lowered his voice. “Ok, sure. He was mainly into the morphology of print pagination, it had to do with codes marked-out across bound pages.”

The sweetness was gone after the first new draught, and Graham attempted to drown the rest of the bitterness as Emlen nodded him on, “Yes, yes I know of his Kenworth models, eye-tracking and pattern recognition, the ‘science of the bible code’ and speed-reading. Useful stuff. But I’m not sure he’s still at London, last I heard he was in New York with the Houses. Why him?”

“Because he kept a surprising collection of bounds for his research. Or ran virtualisations of texts to simulate the bound reading experience. Used super hi-res screens to mimic the bond. Attempting to de-couple reading pattern from narrative—had a lot of research works. We got on pretty well, I thought he might have kept up on my publications since.”

“... I wouldn’t think so. It seems he’s a consultant for forensic reading now.” Emlen looked up from where he’d been online throughout the conversation—Graham had heard that used to be rude, multi-threading like that. “He’s a consultant in document security now, calls his office ‘Paperless,’” he tapped the screen, “I’ve seen his kind of security at work before—whole offices set alight to control print.” He turned his mobile to Graham, “Is that him?” And Graham nodded. “Look at his picture, he’s in his office.

He doesn't even have any shelves. He's too dangerous to approach now. He's the enemy." Shook his head, stopped and held Graham's eyes, his look said, "Gotta do better than that." Emlen continued, "And the other names on the list?"

Shit. "Only a couple of ex-students—boys, really. They were barred from study in a piracy settlement. Bankrupted, too. I would have been called by the prosecution—one of mine was on the list of unauthorised bounds—but it never ended up going through, not when they settled out of court."

"Sure." Emlen drank up to follow Graham's empty glass, and Graham felt disappointed when Emlen stood to go.

Out on the street from the pub, there were "no-go" zones around the hit, marked by push notifications: "Street closed. Follow prompts to detour." The notes buzzed through the mobiles in their pockets, tingling like a mild electric fence. Graham had never been subject to a public safety announcement before. *Nice*. He grimaced. There were watch profiles attached to the notices—Graham remembered how weird it was, when not five years ago, he'd seen the authorities slipping into the tweetfeed—the "tweed"—racket. He'd seen whole crowds, signed-on to their feeds, turning as one to peer at a suspected perp moving by on the street. Led blindly by their mobile's compass to the man's location. Citizen action, huh? He knew the profiles would try to Trojan his mobile, to look for likely matches of CCTV shots as taken from around the hit building. Checking against his mobile avatar. Not likely: he deleted the notices. It was all still voluntary.

The confetti of scorched bond was still falling under the convection winds. There were sirens blaring distantly. Tattered e-ink posters showed their uniquely stuttered, flip-book video of the crime. Graham tried to match the footage with his first person point of view. He couldn't make it fit, and instead looked over between two buildings, through to the designated ad-space. It was only blank air to unaugmented eyes, but he wondered if seen through a screen it was tagged with the same public service alert? Saying:

"TERRORISTS STRIKE! Watch for these men and women, robbing you of knowledge."

He didn't want to look around. Not to give himself away. But what else would it mean, traveling with this insane "Emlen?" Someone must see them.

God he was tired, it was almost three in the morning. The Collective members had each drunk drugs bonded to electrolytes before the hit. But he'd since pissed a stream of the custom, diuretic stimulants. Clean now for any inspection. Exhausted. Paranoid. Fucked. *Watched?* Emlen pushed them on and they caught a ped cycling by.

“Their profiles both point to Vauxhall... that’s their projected location... from past evenings, is... yeah, still pretty close to where they are now...” Graham shook his head. Then continued reading from his mobile, “The feeds say the club is called the ‘Cat of Alexandria.’” Graham didn’t feel bothered by this invasion of privacy—and certainly not now. Whatever the boys had disclosed to their feed—on which he was an authorised voyeur—that wasn’t prying. “Digital privacy” was a meaningless term. Hell, it was as oxymoronic as “published” privacy. “Oh God! It’s a live word club. I haven’t seen one of those in ages. Desist orders must be rife. The club’s gotta be a legal nightmare.”

The two boys, Adam and Manoj, had been students in his *Intro to Info Architecture* class. Until they were caught with unlicensed bounds. The ensuing case looked like it might’ve become epic, though he’d only been half interested in it at the time. They would have been up for costs equaling the price of the bound, times its projected lifespan, divided by its reading time. That, and a one-year text restriction per offence. In the end, they’d settled out of court for an undisclosed sum, but still had to take the minimum hundred-year text restriction—print and digital. Their crime had been with print-bounds, but the law was too slow to adapt and hadn’t yet made a distinction between the two. That did in their studies. He hadn’t seen them around after the case.

“I’ve heard of these ‘rebel’ clubs. The new vogue of it, not to be signed to a House. No official texts or recordings, only textual bootlegs, driving audiences in to see them talk. The ‘post-publishing’ movement.” Emlen didn’t sound too impressed—though he seemed to know a lot about it—and Graham squirmed in his seat behind the odorless, hydrogen exhaust of the semi-ped. He was quite uncomfortable with the illegitimacy of it all. “Perfect way to side-step their text restrictions,” muttered Emlen, then continued thoughtfully, “You know that Catherine of Alexandria is actually the patron saint of libraries? And yet this club celebrates impermanence...”

Graham had to laugh listening to Emlen, the proper use of “scathing” just didn’t come along often enough.

“Where’s your library then, Emlen?”

“Scattered across the shelves of the world—though the owners of the bounds don’t know about it. Hopefully they never will. That’s on my PR. Did I give you a card?” Graham nodded, and patted his breast pocket. His card, a rectangle of expensive bond, was only a search term, “Bibliometric detective.” Emlen had handed it to him, with great ceremony, in the bar. Graham did not understand why. “And I never said I was a Librarian, Graham. Best to remember that.”

The other man lowered his outlandish goggles, presumably back against the wind.

Once they arrived at the club, they climbed from the chrome frame of their rickshaw—while the cycle courier, in her woven ur-leather, took the balance of their fare by geo-attrition; Emlen paid by waving her away with his mobile. The scrawny girl looked around at the advertising dead-space they’d come to, shrugged down onto her pedals, sparking her cells, and raced away unfettered after a gang of free bikes that had swooped by. The cyclists had gotten default routes after too many of them had been cut-up in a murder-meme. As she sped off, Graham wondered about the motor taxis a friend had said they had in Moscow, with full engines instead of a half-and-half pedal. Then instead of thinking, he wrinkled his nose against the new-car smell of the water drops that had beaded on him from the exhaust. Fuck it, huh? Without any flickering posters around, the street looked empty as an ill-planned data model. They walked along the street to a blank doorway.

Graham knew that if you held your mobile over the front of the door space, you’d get layers of virtual neon. And that there’d be an embedded stream of a remote doorman in that virtual layer; they didn’t have an entrance list, instead, they would spider for web-recommendations on the go: are you well-searched enough for us? Now that they were still, hanging outside an illegal club, Graham worried they’d be refused entry—but then they were swiftly admitted. He’d been expecting having to beg, or to loiter outside, waiting for the two kids to exit. Emlen hadn’t even given a name at the door to be checked; only a msgboard address.

Inside the club it was DnB. Drums at a hundred and eighty-five BPM / and the sub-bass at a slower, iambic ninety. Some of the dancers raved inhumanly at the slower pentameter, holding their water bottles high into the laser light, the agitated bubbles

foaming in their drinks like molten silver. Graham would not have thought that the declamations were human, so sped were the samples of verse; but looking over the twisting bodies, he saw it was actually being mixed live. His headache sped quicker in time.

Emlen went off by himself, holding his feeder with the kid's composite pictures, and Graham was left to look himself. Walking through the mass of kids, he might normally have felt like an authority figure, better than anyone else present—teacher amongst the children—but after the mess of his night, he only felt himself in a teknoir nightmare—disembodied in the vid. Buffeted by clammy bodies, drenched in dancing. He could barely even see faces in the light; though the epileptic flashes of strobe seemed to reveal a substrate to the crowd of heads. Flashing. Did he recognise one of those skulls? Was he being followed by a skeletal head in the dark?

So lost, of course, he met Adam first: with long, fine hair and wearing his old peaked-cap. Reintroductions were as simple as each having set their mobiles to vibrate when friends list were near. He turned straight toward Adam at the mobile nudge. Then he saw him, sitting by himself in a raised booth.

“Mr Nutt! Graham.” Adam looked confused momentarily, having addressed another man as a “Mr Something.” “I wouldn't have thought to see you here.”

“Hey, Adam. Been a couple of years. How are things?”

Adam looked around him. The club was oddly text-less—and having thought that now, Graham realised that even the virtual signs were in java and flash, nothing published over the day that was allowed to a transient work. Even the bottles that guests carried were stripped free of labels.

“Weird,” that's what Adam said. That's what anyone would have thought. “Things have been weird. What're you doing here, man? You here on a date?” He looked around. “I mean, I didn't think this was your kind of scene?” Graham smiled that judgment away. He could be, and go anywhere, right?

“I was here to see you and Manoj, actually. I'm doing a bit of research you could help me with.” They both paused while someone started speaking over the PA, sounding as if halfway through the “third chapter” of something.

“Yeah? Bit early in the morning for that, isn't it?” Graham could understand why

Adam might not be entirely warm to him; he'd never come to their defense after all—not that a Writer could have denied the legalities against the kids. Behind them, the voice on the PA had no reverberate-edge to be stripped—it was a voice perfect for MP3.

“You know how neither night nor day gets in the way of it.”

Adam nodded stage ward, “Well sure, and we're both here anyways.” Graham looked over, and recognised him then: short and dark, in a tight, offensive t-shirt. “And it's most probably legal for us to be here, right, so it's all good,” Adam shouted that, over Manoj on the stage, who was proclaiming it a “Calm, clear day.”

Graham notified Emlen to join them, but while they waited, Adam asked the one question he really didn't know the answer to yet.

“What are you up to, Graham?”

“I'm looking for a bound of my last book. And... err.... given your past history, I thought you might actually have one.”

“Legit or not, huh?” Adam smiled. “Why would we be up for helping you though?”

He wasn't sure what to say, but then Emlen arrived and leant between the two of them: Graham, and doubting Adam.

“You wouldn't be helping him. You'd be helping me: Charles Emlen.” He passed over a kind of encrypted recommendation, and Adam looked over him with the public keys provided—impossible to forge those credentials. Graham had seen academics blurb themselves like that before—though not often in a loud recital-club. Whatever it said—“trust him” for all he knew—whoever it was from, Adam realised he'd been speaking to the wrong guy.

“You're for real?” asked Adam.

Emlen merely nodded, and told Graham to get them all drinks. “We'll meet without you,” he was told. “Manoj, too,” from Adam. So Graham went.

The money he paid at the bar—in crinkled plastic notes—was probably the only thing with print in the place. The barman wasn't happy taking it either, preferring a more secure micro payment. As he collected the narrow bottles, he sniffed at the selection at the bar—a bar which itself smelt of nothing but honey and fresh sweat; only saccharine alcopops and electrolysed smart-waters for sale. Though Graham guessed that Adam and

Manoj would be ok with that.

Back at the alcove, Manoj had joined them from the stage, and the two boys were sitting in silence with Emlen. As Graham put the drinks down, Adam asked him, “What do you think of our club, Graham?” He just nodded stupidly in response. Adam spoke on, “Yeah. ‘Post-publishing,’ you know? We weren’t allowed near text or print again; so this is the idea: let the other guys write it for us—us making a spectacle of ourselves.”

Manoj spoke for the first time, “It’s not actually all ours. In fact, not being able to sign-off on a contract makes owning anything pretty damn hard.”

Adam cut him off, “But we could have gone with a label, been performers instead of orphaned Writers... but we like it this way, the club is with us, to subvert the injustice done us.” Manoj just nodded with him in an adorable, anime complicity—wide-eyed and enthusiastic. And then gently looked away.

“They’ve agreed to show us what they have, Graham, Adam here was just going to run the works they—” but Emlen didn’t get to continue.

“Adam,” beside the boy, Manoj jerked, “We’ve got visitors.”

“How do you know?” Graham figured looking at the little guy was the thing to do: the other two men had turned to him.

“Because they’ve logged in to the damn club under one of my own pseudonyms!” He turned his mobile around for them all to see. There was no text on the screen, only smarticons surrounding a slightly pixel-shifted version of his own face. If he hadn’t been sitting there, holding the screen beside his head, Graham never would have known the two images weren’t “just” twins from over the other side of the world.

“Dammit!” Emlen laughed, “What’re the chances of that?” Shaking his head, he then perked forwards, “Do you have another way out of here?”

“Of course we do, but what’s it to us? Why would they be here for us?” asked Adam.

“Adam. If I’m caught-out with this pseudonym...” and Adam bit his lip at Manoj’s failed statement.

Then Adam stood, “Alright then, follow us.” But did not break gaze with Graham.

Like it’s my fault, you twerp! But Graham looked away first, as Emlen swiftly collected his materials. Adam stepped off the platform for the back of the club. That’s

when Graham literally saw the darkness coming for them, plowing through the crowd of dancers. Headed by that damned skull.

“Move it!” he shouted, and the other two actually started after him, pushing for the far wall.

Graham was impressed with the speed they made, what with Adam and Manoj having pulled their jackets over their heads. *What the fuck?* But at least there was a trick they had, moving through the crowd—Graham was sure he must have known it himself once, but it was lost in the rush of blood to his head.

Graham was just lucky to follow them to a hidden door—painted black eggshell.

Pausing to get it open, Graham watched dumbly as Emlen turned to grab his arm. Saw his eyes flare as he twisted to the side and took Graham with him. “Down—” There was one low beat—felt, and not heard—out of time with the music— “Up!” Emlen dragged him. For an instant he was off his feet, then running. As they passed the door now leading them out, Graham pulled along behind Emlen, his eyes came brushing close by the wood. The black paintwork was blistered and smoking.

“Jesus Fuck!” But Emlen pushed him down the fire escape before he could look at it again. Whatever else happened, Graham concentrated on hitting at least one out of every three steps both storeys down.

At the bottom of the building, Adam spat, “What the Hell have you got us involved in now, Graham?” Before wiping away a spot of blood-stained drool from his lip. *Damn, he must have hit his face in the rush down.* Then Adam shrugged and hunched over with Manoj to shift a pile of refuse. Graham saw how they quickly revealed a hidden grate.

“Brilliant setup, gentlemen. I’d give us at least a minute before they get past your dead-way,” Emlen had swooped down the escape.

“They’re after me, aren’t they?”

Adam rounded on Graham, “Why so sure?”

“Christ, if you’d had the night I’ve had, you’d think it too.”

“Forget it now, Adam, keep up the escape and I’ll do what I can for you both,” Emlen—for the first time—exuded an incredible surety.

If only, thought Graham. But he shut up, and helped throw rubbish to the side, to

slip through the narrow passage.

Emlen spent the getaway talking the two boys through staying ahead of the pursuit. By the time the group of them came to the boy's hideaway pad, the two were calmer than Graham could manage.

"Yeah, we've been pretty good about text," Adam slipped a key into their door, eschewing the scratched datapad, "Turns out that 'restrictions' make the art. I was never especially creative before, but having to change like that... never writing again... it flips you—being broke hasn't helped much either; it was either get involved in some hardcore movement, or sleep the whole day away and die—but then again, we don't do 'sleeping' very well, do we Man'oo?" And Manoj grinned defensively at the wink that followed.

"Is this Printcore you're into?" Emlen in his professional, utilitarian suit, a one-piece slung with holsters, suddenly synched perfectly with their drab-punk.

"No, man. Printcore, textcore, pixel- or ink-core all went away ages ago, along with stuff like queercore music—all those 'cores—by definition having to be harder than each other and themselves. It's all just simple hardcore again, and better that way." They showed the two older men into their one room and bed, floor covered in discarded clothing. "I like it better as this non-declarative movement. All that screaming about 'the ink and the bond and the leather'—Christ. Fuck that. Just spoilt kids reminiscing 'bout that one bound from their childhood, the one their parents had to hock..."

Manoj sat back on their bed with a box from out the wardrobe, and just looked at it, embarrassed.

Graham sat with him, and joked, "This where you hide your porn?"

Manoj looked away from him, back down at the box. "We don't hide our porn," he said, confused, "This is where we put our 'naughty' stuff." He blushed black. "Go on." And handed it over.

Inside there were postcards, "Saved from that damned cull," said Adam, sent from close friends away on a holiday. And from only a few years ago, a diary and torn band posters taken directly from a derelict wall. And two print bounds.

"No pens," said Emlen.

"We don't take notes," from Manoj, "We teach each other. Taking turns to talk it

through the night. It works pretty well.”

They were both academic works: one of international poetry, each page of the original and then the English translation. And one was Graham’s, *On the inter-relationship of titling to identity in textual communities*.

It wasn’t the title he was after, however. “You kept it? From when they charged you.”

“... Yeah.” Manoj took it from him, flickering through the bond. “It’s probably the one that got us in trouble to begin with. Not so much the print itself; we used to write notes in the margins, and leave them for each other.” He looked at Graham, the Writer, guiltily, “They’re relevant to the text... I don’t know, I liked how insecure it was—though not how insecure we were,” he apologised shyly to Adam. *God*, thought Graham, *They wrote each other love notes in the margins of my bound*, arguing with each other and explaining themselves. Manoj smiled, “But that too. It was different than leaving mgs on boards and hacking away at a pad. This felt more tender.”

“The notes were on the two of you?” Emlen asked. “About your—a couple’s—hermeneutical interpretation of the text.”

“Yeah,” they nodded. Laughed shyly. And Graham had wished he’d paid more attention to them at the time. “We argued over what you were saying, Mr Nutt, but we used it like a cypher—so I knew how he’d felt, coming to his interpretation. Shit, I never wanted you to correct us! Then I wouldn’t have known what was what.”

“That’s not really what we’re after. It’s not even the right bound,” Emlen had passed on it already.

Adam shrugged, “It’s what we’ve got. Not sure they could even do us for still having it. We’ve been charged for it once already,” he laughed. Graham held on to the look Adam and Manoj then gave one another, of lovelorn fish pouting around their own hooks. But Emlen had already stood, boots upon their make-up, over their make-believe clothing—pieces strewn across the floor.

“Remember what I told you, and you should survive.”

Graham didn’t know what to say after that. So he left them instead.

They were moving again. They’d returned to the Tube—to the fisheye lens distortion of

the underground. “Cute,” Graham muttered, “They own an illegal print-job for the intrinsic flaw that it’s been Authored. That it isn’t an auto-correcting text. That bound’s only ever been valuable to them for once having been ‘right.’ That it’s a part of their own history, reading it made the bound a love letter between the two of them.” Graham mused on that: he’d thought their scrawlings were just masturbation—grotty, low, obscene—*I never thought of the two of them... together; just as faintly scandalous boys. But how poetic...*

Emlen said, “People connect over their bounds. That’s print’s great value right there: the call and response between two young men.” Graham thought then—as Emlen’s fingers twitched in excitement, uselessly haptic—thought about static narratives, print bounds versus evolving texts. Narratives always in process, never slowing enough to be interrogated. Texts never slowing enough to be loved.

They’d already switched three train lines, and it felt like Emlen would never stop. He grinned over at Graham from a train bench, swaying over absurd Nineteenth Century lines, holding up two cheap trade-bounds.

“The Underground Library.” He passed Graham a romance, open to the inside cover. “Have a look.”

Graham recoiled from the bound. “Is that clean?” He thought of its *Inspiration* hazard.

Emlen shrugged, “While it’s very unlikely there would be any infestation... you don’t even write in its genre.” That was true. It was a yaoi—Japanese boy porn. And no, he didn’t write that, so Graham knew he was just being silly. You had to be a Writer—had to have an inclination to the genre—in order for the *Inspiration* to give you any more than just the thrill of reading. But obviously, Emlen wasn’t a Writer, or he would understand the—all right, somewhat irrational—fear of becoming addicted, to forever having to top that drugged sense of *Inspiration*.

Graham reached out, and lifted the bound hesitantly, opening it. There was a sticker inside: “Bookcrossing: London Underground Branch,” a blurb and reference number.

“You track it by searching for its number, finding its release notes and the reviews of it scattered wherever they are amongst any non-House boards. It’s been around for

years, but now it's had to go, quite literally, underground. Most of the refs are merely for admin, and there's been no real organisation to it at all. I try and take the sorting in hand whenever I'm on the Tube—I developed a line-based system: Victoria for the romances, of course.”

Graham hefted the acid-browned bound—old hardware—and frowned, “Emlen, do you actually know of any print copies of my book?”

“Legally art-published? Yes, I have heard of a couple. I wouldn't know who would have bought them—that's why I wanted you.” Emlen passed him a literary detective story, swapping their bounds. “You've been on my radar for a while—bleeping rather loudly I have to add. I heard about the job you had on tonight, and I knew I'd have to step it up to bring you in. But lets be sure about this, Graham: what I really need is an assistant to find my lost bound. Now it's just perfect that you need my help too.”

Graham had known it. “I told you not to worry about the clerks,” he chuckled, “But really, Graham! You might not have counted much before, stealing a few bounds here and there—it's the dissemination large-scale that bothers the powers—but you blew up a building.” Stopped. Thought. “Or near enough. A few floors of it. They might not be modified, killer cyborgs ... but they're after you now. I thought we would have more time to work tracking your bound, but now we really just have to keep you moving.”

The train came to a jerking halt. They stood and considered.

“I'll look after you. I have a safehouse to go to now it's late—took me all night with us running round to arrange it, but this has been great cover. We can work out what we—or you and I separately,” he held out his hands, “Do from there. It's up to you.”

As he stepped off the train, Graham thought about staying seated and accelerating away from him.

“Yeah, ok,” and alighted with him. What else could he do—zoom around the tracks all night? Wait and be picked up, have his head stuffed in a black bag and disappear? He looked properly at Emlen, saw he was clothed in binding leathers, that he had mirrored nightsight goggles lodged by the end of his nose. And a holster, with snub-nosed gun on his hip. Standing on the edge of the platform, Emlen was busy performing corrective surgery on the bound, from a field kit of scalpels and tape. Fuck.

“You're a nerd!” he said gently.

Emlen snapped up his head, flashing a slant-eyed glint of scalpel. “Of course. The most dangerous nerd you’ll ever meet.”

Is this what I’m in for?

Holding the bound, still stinking of long-pins of setting glue, Emlen spent credits to request the next Victoria train coming by. As it arrived and slowed he trotted over to it. Still holding the porn-romance, he flicked through it and shuffled his card inside; that same extravagant scrap of bond.

Once the train stopped, he held Graham off while jumping aboard himself, to secrete the bound behind a seat, easily walking the carriage and coming off down the platform.

“Isn’t that environmentally irresponsible?” asked Graham, pointing at the window by the hidden bound as the train left.

Emlen laughed sharply, “Do you know the research regarding greenhouse gasses off a human? Or any on population density, indexed versus an educated, literately interrogative stance?” He didn’t. “Then I’ll just tell you this, libraries of bounds are one hell of a contraceptive.”

Emlen slapped the powdery dust of the bound from his hands, striding away up the escalator. “Tally-ho!”

The station wasn’t a narrative, its ads and notices instead an ongoing soap opera. They climbed from the station, past a strangely litterless street-entry: no flyers, no stomped-upon papers. No midnight rustling of rubbish.

Nanograph Three

New York — The SoHo-Cast Iron District — Two Years Ago

Ned watched as Agent Choinski awkwardly followed his own calm lead, taking a gulp of air before pulling the hood of her hazmat closed. He nodded to her, saying roughly over the mic, “You’re safe now.” He’d already felt the pinch in his own throat, of cartilage fracturing in the gas. He tried to take a long, deep breath of recyc’d air and then looked around through his goggles. The air so grainy, dusted... the way an old war film showed a nerve gas attack. He crossed to her, checking the hood that fit loosely around her bouffant hair, but it was secure. It’d be worth the discomfort.

Ned was proud of his innovation; thinking of his competition in the security rackets, the consultancies and their fire. Burning evidence and infrastructure alike. No, this was better. An aerosolised, termite-derived, cellulite-dissolving enzyme. With the right precautions, it was safer than fire.

Theoretically. Though the Agent had asked him of the tests she’d seen, made on clean slabs of vat-grown flesh... Yes, it should only have attacked the contravening bond. He hadn’t wanted to admit that. So she had evacuated the whole site herself, “Just in case,” and he had felt professionally stung—though personally appreciative of her sense of duty.

Covered, the two of them walked back into the kink club, where Ned had to grimace in soft, ironic humor: the cloakroom had peg after peg of gasmasks of their own. Well, he shrugged, if that’s what the punters wanted. Closing the curtain behind him, he left only a small, puckered gap around the nozzle of the gas hose and followed her inside the main room.

Ned immediately saw the ludicrous print-jobs, literally ticker-taped around the two podiums, and shook his head—why would anyone be so gauche? Though he actually had a pretty good idea of why.

Choinski walked over to the stage, where she bowed and picked at some of the threads of now sticky bond.

As if in sympathy for their Writers. How novel. In contrast, at the time he’d developed the gas, corporations and Houses had all been overly concerned with

analogue security—hence his ridiculous business name: Paperless Securities. The corporations always wanted to know, “Why would anyone print?” But Ned knew why—that’s how he came to be out in enterprise after all, away from academia; they thought it was simple foolishness or blackmail? Ned knew: print was philosophical. Egotism made crystal.

No room for sympathy then.

While the corporations had loved him, he’d only used them to prove his own theories. Reader profiling. And they had so much to thank him for. That’s how they’d found this target, after all.

He watched, as, in her hand, the contra-bond bled its fat from the cellulite fiber. Dribbling ichor to the floor.

His radio crackled: “Needing us? Guys are getting anxious out here.” His men were waiting outside the tent on stand by. Normally, this kind of job would only be him and his men, an Agent of her rank would never work directly with them, but this was a special case.

“I don’t think so, mate, you can douse ‘em now.” No one liked carrying the torches, holding on, prepared to burn the building. “Looks like it should be wrapped up in here. Get going on to staging area two.” There were new leads to take from there.

The two of them: Agent and consultant, looked across at the dance party photo prints, weeping in their frames around the stage. Then directly at the typewriters, their modified mechanisms still hot from printing.

The House had only brought her in at the end of the mission. To finish it off. Damn right, too, he thought. The club had been hosting illegal Author bouts, patrons betting on two pitted Hemmingways; who, as they wrote, struggled versus one another, the words they wrote, each catching, clipping and chewing the tape of the other man’s prints. Disgusting to use the poor wretches like that. Only one of them would come away with a text, the other likely shipped off, with his promised visa eaten up like the ruins of his shredded tape.

And he knew it wasn’t only that. Authors and diagnosed Writers alike were being spirited illegally into the country every day. Into places like this, encouraged further into print... so they’d never be free of it. Maybe, with the right help, the wretches could have

had a real life. Away from the black market of writing; the underground of the world Metatext.

Ned looked at the crude font on the tape. It was a little gray as to whether it was publishable text at all. But that was why the Agent had been brought in alongside his consultancy, to track those Authors down. To try and, "Bring them into the fold." Huh. Listening to her, you'd have thought she believed it was her ethical duty. But Ned knew, if the Houses couldn't have them as Writers, no one would...

Chapter Four

Christy

London — Islington – One-Year Ago

Christy watched as the kids clawed and bit at the air, as if they were holding their breath, bracing for the inevitable impact— No, she shook her head at the thought. It's only natural for them. Their goggles flashed dangerously white in the laser-light spiked from the holosphere set in the centre of the blank classroom. That thing gave her disco migraines. Strafed light etching three-D images on the hole-film covering their out-sized glasses. They played in the text, while sensor-cams picked their movement from across the room, and the light reacted. The other kids in her class could only wait enviously for their turn with the toy. "Toy," that's all it was. Expensive of course; it'd taken a lot of pain for her to requisition the set from their management team. Though it'd only ever been locked away amongst their reference bounds—those prints that they'd been gifted over the years, during the many publisher-community outreach programs—each packed away and unused in the security trunk. Not that any of those adults in management would ever have used the thing anyway; you'd have to have the enthusiasm of a kid to work with it. For more than a few minutes at a time anyway. The kids loved to play on it though—with the literality of it—closest they were ever likely get to literature itself.

Still, she had to smile—smile with her off-synch lips—as she watched over her students sitting and playing. Even as they somehow managed to scour the permaglass of their feeders. She loved it, how impossible that was; but then again, they probably had toys just as indestructible at home, and used 'em to point and jab at their poor screens. What she loved most was the way that they smeared goo and jam over the pages of data; they treated the information there as if it were real.

"Meta-natives," when they should have come to her for help searching, they just played as if with their virtual Legos. Knowing that either they, or their computers would figure it out. When she spoke to them, they were insensate, waiting for Metatextual confirmation. What should have confused them, when they should have come back to her for clarification, they merely knew to let their search engines do for them instead.

“Johnny, how are you doing there?” Christy stood over him as he shuffled coloured blocks of data through his search string. Each new block threw up a graph of responses, but he was only working at random. “Have you tried a facet analysis?” she asked. He spared her a, “No.” Damn it, yeah, she knew she sounded just like her own parents, the time she’d come home from preschool with a mobile. But it wasn’t so much the kid’s bleeding over from virtual to actual that bothered her, but their wholesale swap of it. *Man...* she thought, *I’m such an atavist*. Johnny wasn’t searching, he was looking for an elusive pattern recognition.

The kids were secure that everything would be there for them, and she knew it was only her job to teach them to filter it. Just a virtual hygienist. What’d they have in the sixties? “Free love?” Well this was more like “free information.” Though when she’d thought that, how funny it was, their guy Graham in the Collective had gone on a rant about “information wanting to be free,” right? But it wasn’t like that at all, info didn’t really have any price—though sure, she knew it had one hell of a cost! Nah, she’d meant that it was information in indiscriminate play.

She watched the kids, flipping virtual objects over and around, and she loved it. Christy had only been working at the Access Centre for six months, having turned up to the interview without ever applying for the job. That had been odd; but she had still been the best candidate. And the receptionist had immediately liked her. It made her laugh, how in hell she’d ended up there.

The kids sat cross-legged on the white floor of the classroom—the draftroom—a bare cube of a room, strafed only by pale, locative grid work. At the children and their toys. They sat with their feeders; the kind with the new, foil scrolls; stiff aluminum film that showed an incredible, faintly sepia-tinted Metatext.

Johnny flipped a yellow pyramid onto its tip, following with a purple cube and green sphere, watching and playing for the right info graphic. The screens showed text stuff like a heat map of interests, comments, texts...

She shook her head and stood, hands dug in the pockets of her camo dress—pleated, non-repeating tartan, invisible to any CCTV—feeling surplus to her own class.

Her mobile vibrated an alert, and she looked down to it and saw it was on Jenny's number. Looking over to check on her—a gorgeous five and a half year old—Christy caught Jenny already looking up expectantly over her laser-lit goggles—of course, Jenny would have felt her own mobile twitching around her neck.

Answered, “Hi, Christy Cho here, Jennifer's number.” She dreaded the next moment. Though the kids all had mobiles of course, for ringing out on emergencies, or being kept in check by authorised numbers—some of them were subject to advertising subsidies as well. Fine. Though while they were in class, their calls were routed through Christy's mobile, and now wait for it... If she had to listen to another ad for firefly darts again... I'll hunt them down and show them what a real “cold call” is...

“Hi Christy, this is Titania, Jennifer's nanny.” And across the room, Christy held Jenny's precocious eyes—*oh, aren't we all just her caretakers?* Christy smiled back at the child warmly. “I'm calling to confirm for picking her up early today?” asked Titania.

“Yes, of course, that shouldn't be a problem. They're just working on a project now, but she can pick that up at home if she likes.” They sorted out the timing, and when they were done, Christy ticked Jenny's calendar event off as confirmed. They parted gazes after the little girl had nodded gravely, then ducked away from the corner of her goggles, having seen a link or msg that Jason had thrown to her. Poor dear missed the catch, throwing herself too widely for it, but it bounced from her virtual screen, and instead buzzed into the back of Sharmilla's gear. Oh, Sharm looked pissed with the other two, and so they all began squabbling over the nugget, from seven or eight feet apart.

She left them to it, waving the mobile redirect over to her assistant, so that Andrew could look after the kids while she took a break. Out from the draftroom, she loosened her hair from its bun and rested against a wall. She fondled at the piercing through the bridge of her nose, and tried to re-angle the granny glasses she had mag clamped to it—nope! No good. She grimaced like the kid's newest vid monster, and, cross-eyed, ratchet-tightened her Erl piercing to realign her glasses. Thing was supposed to open her third eye, but best thing she could say for it was that it hadn't given her any migraines. She pocketed the small tool she had for it, and remembered the new guy, Graham, from the collection showing her an old, cached page, “Modified Librarian,” and how she had

wondered what was more outmoded about that? The non-functionality of their old-fashioned rings and tats—because sure, you might carry a nice purse, or tag-gun, but it still had to *be* a purse or gun—was that really any more useless than their weak “librarian” job ID? They were nothing like the Librarians she had known... No! She had to leave those thoughts behind her. No thinking of that, and no time for the collection now, either. Instead, she decided she might as well just wait out there for Jenny’s nanny, as she’d been told Titania wasn’t going to be long.

Rachel was at the information desk, and seeing she was staying out with her, got up and gave Christy a cup of stim to share with her own. They shared a quiet slurp.

The receptionist looked over her cup and asked, “You off for tagging later this afternoon, Christy? They must almost be finished in there right?”

“I hope so! The kids are great, but that weird-as-shit subvocalisation thing they’re doing now? Half talk and half text? My content filters are going nuts on it, can’t pick it up as any one language or another.”

“Chris!” she was scolded, “That’s their point! It’s only preschooler culture jamming,” Rachel grinned. “Those kids have got it made now, perfectly at home in our new golden age of writing. Shame my two kids lost out—too early.” Rachel brushed the fine—*thinning*—blonde hair from her face, and took a sip from her “CRACKED!” mug.

Christy smiled at her reminiscence, but had nothing to add to it. They were very different people. Both of them quietly waited out the last of the stim.

As Rachel decided to reheat the dregs of her cup, the nanny came through. Looking after Rachel and watching the desk for her, Christy made some polite conversation with Titania—both appropriately faerie queen and moon of Uranus simultaneously. Christy held on, using the time to send in a “red” alert to Andrew, stalling the obviously rushed queen.

“Where did you get your face done?” Christy asked her. Titania had tattoos across it, pores breaking the pastels into pixel artifacts. She asked because her own inked makeup was always queried; Christy’s, ever-so slightly off the facial substructure; which wreaked wonderful havoc with face rec programs. Which put the timing of even her

most genuine of smiles into doubt.

“Oh! My mother was one of the first to have it done!” So proudly, “She was a pioneer.” She looked closely at Christy’s awkwardly tattooed face, as if trying to figure out just what was wrong with it, especially when it had been done as expensively as it so obviously had... At least the cops weren’t taught to sketch faces anymore, only to stream coordinate codes for a grid, like a dental hygienist might.

Christy smiled to break the scrutiny, and continued as Andrew signaled that Jenny was ready for pick up. “Come on through.” They went backstage into the main learning area where Andrew was playing grid-games with the kids, having them arrange themselves scatter-graph style by blood type on the AR points etched through the room.

“Jenny!” called her nanny, while flashing her mobile to the system, checking her charge out of the centre. Christy used that disruption to catch the attention of the rest of the kids, getting them ready to start packing away. Jenny and Titania left, waving at them all, and it wasn’t long before Christy’s mobile begun buzzing authentication for each of the other kids as well, and she released them from the care system one by one.

The two teachers finished vac-packing the last set of goggles. “That’s us done for the day!” said Andrew, and then asked her, “Can I help you out on investigation now?”

She shook her head at him. “No, I’m going to take lunch first—maybe tag some food stalls—then wander for a bit. I’ll get you to trawl for any new local folksonomy and slang?” He only nodded glumly, sure, he always got that boring stuff.

Heading out of the Centre, Christy’s glasses snapped to mirror-blockout. Passing from the building, she thought that it was nothing like their concrete collection. Tucked discretely out of the way down an alleyway, there was nothing in the centre at all, only the blankly painted draftrooms, tagged beyond belief. The bit she worked in, Learning, was only a part of the whole Access Centre. The only part of it that was used.

The Borough tried to encourage the community to use it more—high-ups even encouraging spray-tagging by child artists, the cobbled alleyway leading to it covered in bright paint; and they had doubled it as a youth drop-in centre.

The council had tried so hard to appeal to any client they could. It was a lost cause. No one wanted a bare Centre, nor its books, signed as “Anon,” amongst the otherwise social Metatext.

So instead of servicing clients, the Centre staff facilitated. But still, only a part of her day was taken teaching info lit to the kids, the rest of her time was outside, curating the Islington meta-scene.

Crossing the main street, Christy dodged the preschooler kids who were out on the bitumen; where the cars would once have been. From which the peds and scooters had been squeezed, further toward the narrow fast lanes which took a bare six feet or so of the centre way. The little monsters were gargoyleed in misshapen, repurposed Fisher and Pryce radio sets now tuned into jammers. Short-range radio chatter spewed from them, swamping msgs over mobile and feeder screens as unlucky pedestrians passed by. But no one bothered trying to suppress them. They were a horrible pain, disrupting legitimate msgs, but legally it was just too much of a gray area, with the kids only broadcasting over a rickety band of spectrum. Reams of kindy stories poured away into space, and everyone let them go to it. None of the kids actually read, but they all wrote those strange nanos; same old stuff about bunnies with swords, and “then and then, then and then... then,” sometimes, Christy admitted, she wanted to know what happened next. But you couldn’t ask them, it was only text broadcast by static.

She knew that’s what Rachel liked about the kids—the little monsters and gargoyles—that’s what Rachel had made her name in moonlighting; writing nanographs. Christy had tuned in to the cloud of Rachel’s transient romances once or twice herself, the older woman roleplaying at Writing, and msging her unending soap to middle-aged readers. It never amounted to much, but readers apparently liked to listen to Rachel’s imagined day.

The kids were just showing off their interpretations. A part of the new creative class—making a thing of found objects, and not understanding them at all.

Christy smiled at them while she went by. They were so quiet, but as she peeked at a stream of their chatter—where it had muddled into her mobile—it read lovingly like an

adult Writer, reminiscent of their playground. So immersive was their literate ethnography.

Soon they too would seek to read, because that was the social contract: read, in order to write your self; like a chain, then, it is tit for tat, as others seek the same validation.

Enjoy it while it lasts!

She'd said she was going to get lunch, and so headed past their play over to the old Nag's Head market. The pub had burnt to a shell a couple of years ago, and when it'd been cheaper to preserve the ruin under a coat of liquid glass than to do it up to its Heritage listing, the owners did their least and left it. Since then it'd been rented to food stalls: carts supplying fried lotus roots like Meccano set train wheels, and wild Indian signatures in ghee and sugar. But now the Caribbean and Polish stalls had gone too up-market, it was mostly down to Greek and Welsh cuisine.

She actually managed some Malay today. Christy had once been told that a friend of a friend had seen the stall man melting plastic drink bottles into his hot oil; saying it kept the fritters 'crispy.' It had actually been in the local rag—which yes, still had a little circulation; mostly for the money laundering on the recyc jag—not so reliable. When she'd checked it on the Borough wiki, though, it'd said nothing of it, and she was more likely to believe that text than a friend. Just how many crowd-sourced witnesses could be wrong?

“What's on today?” she asked him.

“Nasi -- only.” One option. The stalls were rather like a high-class restaurant, you had to trust what the day recommended. It would be good. He threw anchovies into his glassy oil and it roiled, the fish boiling away into steam on contact. There'd be nothing left of them except fish chips in moments.

“What are you using in the rice? Those knotted strings?” she pointed at the creamy pot.

“Pandan leaf,” he said. Right. She reached over into her shoulder bag for her gun,

drawing, and pointed it at his face.

She raised her eyebrow. “Can I?” she emoted. He nodded. He knew the deal.

Christy pulled the trigger and he said, “Yes.” So that in the viewfinder she’d captured his permission to tag him. Once she had that on record, she took a locative pic of the pandan knots, linking it to a wiki article of the same name. Then started zapping the rest of his stall with wide flashes of IR. Most of it was the same as it had been the last she’d been by, but it was part of the job to weed the links. Yeah, she was updating his menu. The glamorous life of an information hygienist.

As she finished, he passed her the coconut rice and egg in a pulp cone—to be eaten itself, or thrown away—topped with the crispy fish. Looking at it, the cone reminded her of nothing more than a corrugated stim cup. Nibbling it, she wrinkled her nose and thought, *Well, this is why the streets are clear, and why they smell of rotting paddies*. It was desiccated rice-pulp; best could be said it wasn’t carcinogenic. As she ate, she walked away around the stalls and curated evidence. One hand on the cone, one on her gun.

She thought of the events that had led her there, hidden from her erstwhile employers. Christy looked away from her own pound-store window reflection; she’d gotten those damn tattoos in a mod shop after retirement. Made to match a force-evolved, simulated face—grown in a virtual primordial sea, so no one in the world had one quite like it. As far as the Borough systems knew to report, their daily population numbers matched with legitimate mobile avatars. She’d made sure to check-in to the area every day, building up a routine. Her whole life had become a cover story. Especially so, since she had fallen once again, backward into illegitimacy.

It hadn’t been long since the Collective had run from the disaster at the Atrium. For those three nights, she’d had to sustain her suspension of disbelief, thinking that everyone had also successfully gone to ground the way they’d planned.

She should never have done them the favour of working with their group. But she’d loved the audacity of it.

Christy had originally met Samanya at a fetish club—club cum gallery—in an old

storefront. It had windows for displayed kink, and sold handcrafts; best booming cottage industry in the nation: those toys made with love. She had been in places like that before, but maybe now all she wanted was a little contrition.

That weird fucker had been planning to have his whole body encased in papier-mâché. Literally in chewed-out paper, direct from the mouths of hangers-on, applied from their lips to his body, like a bug would do it. His fans drinking gum mixed with gin, their sticky mouths stinking of juniper. He wanted a binding expert to stitch him into leather with silken thread, but that wasn't a common skill anymore, and there weren't even many there who would have seen a bound done properly—though Christy had. He had to be happy with being encased in pulp.

After going along to watch his show, Christy had found herself having to cut him from his sarcophagus, after it'd shrunk on him like drying rawhide and cracked a few of his ribs. It was stupid that out of all the cutters there, none had more than an artily rusted razor—though of course properly treated against tetanus. At least she had the switch-knife in her boot. He kept the blooded cast, and after she had told him what an idiot he was, they talked.

“I love how the bounds feel... bond pages like speckled eggshell.” Wow, she thought, here's an actual, Godforsaken, bibliophile. “... And sharing them around, touching the same bond someone else has read.” Listening to him, she couldn't decide whether bibliophilia was more a sexuality, or a disease. That wasn't what she was at the club for; she'd just wanted to be whipped or something.

After she had retired from the old job, Christy hadn't seen much to interest her in the wider knowledge economy; she had only picked up the job at Islington Access because that's all she was good for. After the days were done, she was content to go home and knit.

Yet here was a gorgeous guy who literally wanted to be in a bound, actually a part of it; the exact way that those kids were not alienated from their own stories. They must have been meant for each other.

He'd said, “Every day, when I commute, I see kids acting out stories. It's

gorgeous, but also timeless—oh, I know they say that nothing’s ever lost, but for the same thing, is it ever really found again? Maybe their text is the eternal, digital spirit, but then so are bounds the body! And,” he’d leant in to her, “We love our bodies, don’t we? It’s how we commune with one another.” Christy felt herself flush. Nothing like that had occurred to her before, not even after all the training and work she’d done in the field. This guy wasn’t ashamed of his anachronism; he thought it was the only way—for all of them—to reconnect with what they’d lost.

It was since meeting him that she’d been watching the kids more closely, seen what it was they did that so impressed him—so naturally a part of their own system—but also what it was they’d each lost in the change; more interested in making their own books than in being a part of someone else’s story. So weirdly solipsistic. She had found herself walking through adolescent cities of the damned.

Samanya didn’t work in any of the knowledge-based industries—he was in deliveries instead. After they’d had a couple of drinks he wanted to take her out of the club, out somewhere in his van. She’d agreed.

While she fucked up her pregened PIN, with the club refusing to let her out till she had it right—making her angry, him having to wait for her outside, *But I guess it’s what’s stopping us from being drugged and raped*, she knew that—outside he had collected his chain-motor, a three-wheeler, bolted to a security pole a little down the street. Christy had to sit right behind him while he peddled and rode the motor on and off. They were both all in micro ur-leather—except for where he was in his bandages—and Samanya had inflated a spare bubble round her head.

“I’m not going to take you to my place, all right? I share it with too many other guys—thought I’d take you somewhere else instead, show you what I’m really into!” Bubble-to-bubble, talking to her as if down a child’s tin can and string line. She’d listened to him going on about his “secret project” while she’d been wrapping his chest in the plentiful plastic bandages they’d found in the club greenroom. What was she thinking going with him? Well actually, Christy knew exactly what that was about—she liked him, and knew she could take him out if it came to that. He was a couple of years younger than her, and while they rode, she slipped hands beneath his shirt to where he

was shaking—and it wasn't from the two-stroke of his tri-van.

Her mood had changed when he told her that he shared the other space with his sister, who then actually turned out to be there, buzzing them in. *This can't be my scene, right?* The place they'd been renting was just a large bathroom, or maybe it used to be a boutique halal butchery. All its weather-proofed tiling then sprayed over in white latex to make sure it was clean. Jada was pretty cool at the time, even with having her brother bring another girl in, but even so with her glasses, Christy had immediately decided that she'd never call her by name, she would forever just be "Shades." That had caught on with them all.

"Where'd you meet then?" Shades asked but then hadn't waited for an answer, "We're supposed to check out any new recruits together, Sam." Then to Christy, "I guess you're into bounds?" Samanya had tried to stand up for himself, but it was really only his sister and Christy herself in the bare room by then.

"So what's this you're into?" There was no way they could have afforded this spare place between them, and though she was told that there were others involved, Christy knew that they had to have been getting serious funding from somewhere. Christy didn't know who, but thought it must have been a collector; using them to groom objects from other collections. Maybe Samanya didn't care—maybe none of the collection had—whatever, they'd never own those bounds by themselves, and this was just the closest that they would ever come. "Where are all these bounds from?" They must have had thirty of them, a good score, each vac-packed in travel baggies.

"So he hasn't told you everything then? Awesome," which was the least excited thing she could have said. "I'm still in charge then am I? What do you know about bounds then, Mzz Cho?"

"That this is a good start for a collection, enough to get you into some trouble, but not really enough to make a proper deal on them. May I?" Across one of the tables were three bounds opened to display pages under their plastic wrap. The two siblings tensed when she approached them—shielded under the plastic though they were—and when she peeled the right glove from her hand.

“Careful—” Shades said, “you mustn’t touch a serious bound like that.” Christy had ignored her. She let her sixth sense speed outward, and reached to probe at the bound, feeling the mag fields twisting along her magic ring finger. Having taken off the Faraday glove, the ur-leather interwoven with its own charged copper wire, she still found it weird the way the magnet implanted in her fingertip wouldn’t oscillate over the print... texts were normally just radiation bleeding through a screen, where they’d transubstantiate into a book itself. She’d had these rare-earth implants for work, chiefly for data security, but she had been close to bounds with them as well. Over texts it felt as if there were a very weak force field, repelling the magnets, but over the print of a bound there was nothing. That felt magical, that there was information, and while she could see it, she felt nothing.

“We want to share this with everyone,” he said. But she knew that was like a lover saying they wanted the world to learn love; it was provisional that no one took their own.

“Who are you, Mzz Cho?”

“Christy—” said Samanya in her defence.

“I don’t know,” she had replied. “I work all day with kids in Community Access, but I don’t know if I like it. I used to like what I did.” She paused and looked at him, wishing him to understand. “I worked in publishing, with Writers, but it stopped meaning anything, and I just had to get out.”

“Can we trust you?” Christy nodded her head at Shades. “Yes, I thought so, too,” said Shades, and she had smiled.

The Collective—she thought they were just a cell in something much larger and better funded—their part was purely small time, probably a franchise.

“How do you do it? Steal the bounds? Aren’t they tracked?” Christy had asked.

“We’ve been raiding recyc bins, shoplifting licensed bounds,” from Shades.

“It’s all been a lot more difficult than I thought it’d be,” Samanya said—to his sister’s disdain.

“Well, most bounds are printed on demand by kiosks, so there’s no big score.” Neither of them had really understood how to act-out. That was until Christy had started calling in old favors from her days on the job. That was when they had started on the Arts&Craft racket. And then it got a lot more complicated.

She thought she had trained them well enough to get through the night at the Atrium. She always liked Samanya, but after she had been recruited, she knew it couldn’t really go any further than that. She thought he had to have known that from the start. He’d looked at her, and she didn’t know how he’d known, but she was going to be his way in; once a book-pimp, always.

Nanograph Four

New York State – Bridgeport — Two Years Ago

“I knew you’d come for me now,” said Neilson.

“Of course I would, I’m your Agent aren’t I?” Choinski sat down by his easy chair. Neilson had stayed put since returning from his last trip—he’d tried convincing himself he was being frugal, saving for his now sudden retirement, but knew he was really in hiding. From Choinski. He had always been a little frightened of her, and now he wondered if his time was truly up.

“Sure you are. This is the first time I’ve seen you in more than a year.”

She smiled, humouring him. “Be fair, Neilson, you haven’t Written anything in that time. You were good as dead.” He shuddered at that phrase. She lifted a lump of raw sugar from his bowl, dropping another from the tongs into his tea for him. Choinski stirred the cup slowly. All the while, she didn’t break his gaze, as if to say, “See, aren’t I good to you?”

Instead of fearing her, however, he tried to goad a real response from her, “Maybe then, but what about now? ...”

Choinski smiled, and he was glad to see that it was truly genuine—her eyes relaxed into it. “I’m not here to kill you, what’s the point in that now? The book has flown.”

“Then what do you want? There’s no way you have a new deal for me now.” She shook her head, his career really was over, no one would touch him since he’d committed the Ransom. Neilson continued, “You know I never really wanted to do this. To you.” She had been good to him once, finding him when he was just trying to breakout, pro-Writer.

“Forget that now, Thomas. Maybe I should have worked closer with you. I should have known when you went on Retreat that something was wrong. That’s not why I’m here. Congratulations on the payout. It’s done now. Instead, I want to know who did the paying?”

“Who would have figured anyone would want a book on sharing—a bound no less!” Neilson snorted, even he couldn’t believe it. “I don’t know who.”

“Walk it back for me, Thomas, how they contacted you, how the Ransom happened.”

“Of course you’ve seen the tapes and the interviews. In fact, I thought you’d be there.”

“Did that disappoint you? The other Agents thought I might be too close to you, that my ‘interview’ technique might have suffered for that.”

Neilson nodded, taking the time to consider his answer. He rubbed the blanket draped over his legs. “The House has sent you after the buyer then, have they?” He’d likely never walk properly again, and the Ransom might just pay for those medical expenses—as well as for his existing conditions. He figured he owed her this at least. “Alright, they approached me as I was hawking the last of my first editions...”

Chapter Five

Graham

London — Unknown Location – Now

After they'd run halfway around the city—by foot and by ped—they'd arrived...

Arrived wherever it was they were, and crashed there for the last few drabs of night.

Graham woke painfully, and felt the beginning of a diabetes-like ache in his chest. It wasn't a hangover, but a withdrawal of the usual alcohol lubrication in his veins. He'd recently figured that the bulk of his calorie intake had come from the drink—and right then he was starved. Likely how he'd been developing diabetes symptoms in the first place. He didn't want to think of it. Instead, he looked around the room in which they'd stayed the night. He hadn't been able to see it too clearly the night before, the whole neighborhood having been in a planned brownout. Emlen had his own key to the room, from an alleyway out the back. Once they were inside the Victorian terrace, he'd left Graham there, slipping free to talk with the owner—or that's what Graham had assumed. Graham had been so exhausted, and hadn't minded being left alone. While he knew that it couldn't have been a good place, he hadn't been able to maintain any more stress than a brief, healthy anxiety, and so he'd slept. As morning had come, the light well installed down the original chimney showed him their true predicament. While the chimney itself was glazed green tile and wrought iron—beautiful—the rest of the small room was crude particleboard stapled into place. Emlen had returned in the dark, and was wrapped awkwardly in his ur-leathers—he appeared to be sleeping however he could manage. The room was crowded with plastic mixing tubs, guillotines, clamps and vices all smelling of glue and other chems—it was some kind of lab. A closer inspection of the spray-painted walls showed finger-width gaps, where curls and twists of off-white fibre were packed firmly inside.

“Don't touch that,” Emlen spoke behind him. Graham looked around from poking, to see he was awake.

“It's a fortune in paper. Good bond. Packed into the walls...”

“It is.” Emlen stood, tall and grey as driftwood. “Wonderful insulation—against many intrusions—Robert shreds them, any of the bounds he can’t resell himself, ‘waste not, want not,’” he laughed. “Even unrepentant bibliophiles have to be realistic at times,” Emlen grimaced as he stretched.

“Where the hell are we?” asked Graham.

“We’re safe. It’s his workshop, where he repairs his finds, cutting new bindings in for old.”

“Chalk dust for coke? Like a drug lab?” Emlen smiled at that—or better to call it a grimace? But nodded. Graham looked around. “Cutting fill. Brilliant.”

Still, better here than dead.

Emlen crossed to the door and knocked on it in a complicated staccato. Then waited. But not for too long, so that when the door opened outward, it showed the owner, Robert, must have been waiting for them outside. He actually did look like a drug dealer—one not so happy to have them. He nodded, and Graham followed Emlen through the door. Behind them the room closed blind, the doorway camouflaged in feathers of the scabbed, antique wallpaper. They appeared to be in the man’s kitchen, the smell of the room they’d left resolving into that of pickled cabbage.

“I’m still closed Emlen, so you better come down to the shop now, and explain yourself before I kick you out.” He hadn’t looked at Graham, and Graham had the feeling that he never would. Maybe it was safer that way. They followed the man down a narrow terrace stairway, and at the bottom of it Graham had to gasp at what he saw.

They had stepped into a den of iniquity. Like nothing he’d seen in real life. Almost like the collection, but all wrong; open-faced shelving of raw-grained wood and particle board, slotted like a circuit stack with bounds, their spines sticking outward. It was the worst possible way to store them. Christ... All that pressure on the binding—*Perhaps he secures them through the page-ends*, Graham thought, *Not to have the volumes lifted by unscrupulous hands, slicing the chained spine away from the print*. Sure, that must be it.

Emlen laughed, “You seem shocked by what you see Graham?” Yes, he was.

Obviously, this was one of those “secondhand” stores; though not actually illegal, they were the very worst of the gray bounds market. They’d never raided that kind of place for the collection; only from fully certified, Cache-standard collections.

Bounds came in two forms: rich, attractive and safe; or unregistered and likely dangerous. Secondhand stores sold bounds that “probably” weren’t infested with *Inspiration*. Probably.

Thankfully. He could safely swear that he’d never been inside this kind of place before. It actually made him gag, the smell of cheap acid burning into cellulose; the kind of firetrap lounge you heard the police would have raided.

He stopped at the entry. *Better than being dead?* ... That smell?... he choked. It was a potpourri. There was a reason the police often targeted and burnt those stores down—uncontrolled outbreaks of *Inspiration*.

But Emlen scoffed at him, “Robert knows what he’s doing with his material, Graham. We spoke of that. Come in, it isn’t as if you can judge him by the measure of your own righteousness.”

No, he couldn’t talk about being legit. Just that it was so different from the Collective’s own industrial look; or the luxury bound showrooms of the publishing Houses—like art galleries, each on the sales message like a laser: sell the bounds showing, or lock-in a digital sale.

Robert motioned them over to a couple of packing crates, and just shrugged when Graham shook his head at that suggestion violently. He preferred to stand, touching nothing. He noticed, as Robert hunched against the counter, that there was a cash till upon it; oh yes, and what better signifier than there was something wrong with the place? *Cash, the plague rat of finance*.

“I can’t imagine you were foolish enough to be involved in the damage to Gordon’s Library last night,” Robert said to Emlen, who looked Graham’s way instead. “But you’ve got to understand the position you’ve placed me in. There are groups noticing what you’re up to.” Robert moved around his counter, placing it between him and the other two men. “I’ve been good to you in the past, Emlen, but you can’t bring Paul James McLaughlan

the heat on me like this. You understand? They'll come and raid us over your mad stunts." Graham felt his face pinch. He didn't understand, if he was the liability, what was Emlen doing with him?

"Robert, don't be foolish." Emlen remained seated. "You've done well with the favours I've made you in the past." "Past" seemed to be an implied threat. "The Codex alone made you a player."

The two of them watched one another, seemingly playing a psychic battle. Graham really didn't know who he wanted to win. In the end, it seemed that Robert broke himself, giving it away.

"I don't know Emlen, there are rumours you're bringing something to the market—" Emlen stood bolt upright, suddenly threatening.

"No!" called Robert, jerking back from the move—quickly fumbling behind the counter. Before Emlen could move closer, he was met with a click from where Robert's hands were hidden. That stopped Graham short. *He's got a gun!* Graham could only watch as the two men stood at potential violence—

"I didn't mean to..." started Robert. But obviously didn't know how to finish.

Emlen narrowed his eyes. "They'd send me to the Library, Robert, and you know what that means. For both of us." Robert looked back at him desperately. As if with no way out. Emlen continued, "You wanted into this, and I got you what you needed, don't think you can play both sides of it now."

Robert's face literally crumpled then, as if his tension had been giving him a temporary facelift. He moved slowly, bringing the pistol up onto the counter, and weighed it flat on his palm.

Emlen shook his head sadly, "Oh Robert, you wouldn't have wanted to fire a chemical round in here anyway, how would you have explained that to your clients?" He seated himself again. "I'm going to need passes out of the country and in to a Retreat. And equipment."

While the two of them negotiated—Robert now only weakly—Graham realised

that he could do whatever it was he liked, knowing now, that they were both under Emlen's power. To do anything he liked, while trapped inside the shuttered three-by-four, barely able to squeeze around the four head-height shelf dividers. The store itself was dry, almost arctic, in the way cheap bounds sucked moisture from the air—from his throat.

Graham struggled with the thought of how rude it would be to wrap his shirt around his head?

Oh right, fuck it! he thought, *In for a penny-dreadful...* So instead, he wandered, sniffing along a shelf, the sharp volumes of scent variegated like piano keys. Bounds were really just enormous odor-eaters. He wondered why anyone would buy these decrepit things, when the publisher's texts were so easy to find online—albeit encoded with advertising. Heh, maybe that was just it, an old ideology of being ad “free.” There was nothing new; cheap paperbacks like those of new texts would've had to be pulped after their thirty days. Looking at a shelf, he scrunched up courage, and squeezed out a particularly nasty piece. Its spine glue was yellowed with a previous reader's grime—their greasy spoor. Sniffing it like a cigar, he actually smelt something a lot like chewing tobacco—now dried, and brittle spit.

“This is old hardware.” Its warped pages crackled like cartoon fire; a sound effect, which in cinema would have been made of screwed cellophane.

He hadn't meant to interrupt them, but Robert took the excuse, “They're still good!” Graham looked over at them, where they stood by what looked like a sheet of slate and chalk. “The ‘hardware,’ as you say, might be old, but the print is still clear.” It was clear that he had the statement made, ready to fire.

Emlen laughed at his fervor. But then admitted, “He's right, you know.” He went over to look at the bound, taking it from Graham and riffling through the bond. “It's old, it's grotty,” he looked over at the owner accusingly, “But even given that, the bound has an incredible resilience. It's a very clever technology. Print has always only been a representation of the virtual text after all, but the way it's pre-loaded and tied to this hardware... with the bound itself... readers are tricked into equating the text with the

‘ware. The beauty of that is, while print and bond is old, the bound is still the best form of content management ever invented.”

Graham found himself laughing along with Emlen. He knew that after they’d opened the Metatext that had actually been the Houses’ finest selling point; that books were the better buy, because they’d never suffer access problems—drop your feeder in the bath? Sign on to a friend’s feeder: there’s your collection. Try doing that with a bound.

Robert reached out for the bound in Emlen’s hands—and surely he would have snatched it, if he could’ve known it wouldn’t have damaged the old binding even further. Robert turned it in his hands. “It’s more than that: they’re beautiful...”

Graham couldn’t look at either of them, and said, “Yeah... I don’t know about that, shouldn’t books be social? These bounds are so lonely by themselves, I mean I can appreciate the sense of control a Writer... an ‘Author,’ even, would have over them...” Of course he could! “But with books, you can comment on the atomic pieces of it... follow along with the trending annotations... of all the skins of the living text itself. It’s like being a part of a social club.” It was. He knew. He smiled ruefully.

But Robert only laughed bitterly at that, “Ha! ‘Social.’ Just the way the Houses had it after they’d gone and alienated everything else they had. Before the Amazon Standard Catalogue, and the Metatext.” He shook his head, and said to Graham, “You would have been too young, but my parents owned an old store, they used to tell me about it. After the Houses tried to poison the book technology, working underground with the printers, planted books with viral loads onto the peer networks, and over-charged for digital copies while cutting themselves raw on print margins. They only ended up driving their own customers away. That’s why it’s all about the ‘social’ now. Houses figured they couldn’t convince the public texts were worth anything by themselves. No one believed them, no one trusted them.”

No, who does? thought Graham, *You trust other readers, and what they say, not in how it was published, right?* Graham sneered—but gently—oh he knew about that!

They were all browsing while they talked and Graham had edged away to the back

of the store by himself. In his hands he had a browned, but clean-edged bound. He turned it in his hands, it was odd, but he felt no thrill in that. Bringing it to his nose... there was nothing, the cover just a distressed and ruined card. Opening it out, he flipped through some dozen pages, noting its copyright was late last century, the pages were scuffed, and it read as pop fiction.

Then he saw it, some of the pages were mixed-in with post-millennium Jewish tracts—techno-critical, sensitive to a hardcore view of the Sabbath. Graham picked up another and looked through the oddly porous bond—so unlike the newer high-res paper, instead the print ink stretched over those pages like a close-up of a low-def face. Inside there were dates and figures: recent dates. The bound couldn't have been so old if it was an almanac from the last year. He put both of them back as close to where he'd found them as he could.

He checked to see that Emlen and Robert were talking over a far set of shelves. Smudging the edges of the bound's covers, he tried to remove any evidence he'd ever been there. He knew then, that this place was just as bad as he'd thought. There shouldn't be anything so new in here. Nothing so cheap it hadn't been certified clean.

But the Jewish bound made sense, that had been going through the courts for years. Hardliners saying they couldn't use a feeder on the Sabbath, and that print restrictions were a violation of their "inviolable" religious freedoms. Oh, but let the courts decide on that! The gun, sitting on the counter, made Graham feel less nervous than this. He understood then how Emlen was so sure that the place was clean of *Inspiration*. It was a professional chop shop; it broke the laws of the bounds. Risked censure on the *Dublin Act*—no one took fucking about with bounds lightly. There deadly consequences to that: black hoods and extradition to transit nations.

He reached round his hip—spasmed—to check his mobile. Then he remembered: the night before, they'd passed it off to an operative of Emlen's, and now he had no idea what had been done with it. Last night was more manic than he'd felt it at the time. Now he had the chance to consider everything that had happened, and where he was now; this was far from a safe place. Then again, Emlen had said he was taking the two of them to a "safehouse"—compound word, as he now knew it, and not actually a place of safety.

He'd also said he was sincere in helping Graham track down a copy of his bound. Sure, so he could follow the changes that'd been made to it—pinpoint the precise school of hacking used to find his *own* bound—but sincere in that. What choice did Graham have in believing him?

Neither of them had known what the Collective had been up to, though Emlen admitted he should have tried getting Graham out earlier. Brilliant. He'd been stalking Graham, waiting for disaster... Not that he would've gone on this mad run with Emlen if he hadn't been hunted... *Maybe I'm actually the exact opposite of Emlen*, he thought, *Last night after the heist might've been the most normal my life has been—and is gonna be—in a long time.* But Emlen was at home there. Actions and consequences. *We fucked it, and the world worked the way it was supposed to. Now I've got no idea what the hell this is.*

He waited while the two men finished their negotiations, Robert finally agreeing to source whatever it was that Emlen—or the both of them, Graham thought himself into the scheme ruefully—required. Graham thought then they'd go and hide out in the back room, but after Robert closed them in the lab, Emlen collected his few things and looked about ready to leave.

“Should I stay here?”

“I wouldn't trust you to look after yourself,” Emlen shook his head, and Graham thought it might've even been in humour. “You should be ok out on the streets for now. You've got to understand that while data and publishing is a huge business, the groups in control of it want to make it seem naturalised—transparent—anything you did last night makes you a part of their world, of their shadow war. If you're under their jurisdiction, you'll be buried—even invisible—until they want to dig you up. The upshot of that is that they won't dare use civil forces to apprehend you.”

“They're not from the Houses are they? Who are 'they' really? The clerks.” He had to know.

Emlen swallowed, “The Librarians.”

“... And you're a 'Bibliometricist'? Are they like you?”

Emlen looked around, uncomfortable, “No, not like me.” He shook his head, directing them off subject and out the hatch they’d come in the night before, out over the rooftops once again. So different in the morning light. It was still early, and the lack of art in designing the street-top eaves made them seem especially cheap—a res-farmed, student film.

“Where are we going?”

“I’ve another lead on my bound, someone with information. I’ve arranged a meet with him on neutral ground—at a Writer reading—no one will act against us there.” He pushed them on, down in to an alleyway and on to a morning street.

A reading? It had been a long time since he’d been to a book reading—not like the pale shadow of one from the night before. When Graham was beginning to be published—after his first book had been popular amongst the soft-sci set—the whole process had still been a mystery to him... and it still was, he realised now. He had never really tried to understand the mechanics of it then—too vulgar—he’d left that to his elders in the Writer’s committee. They could run the collective bargaining. Young, clever, pretty, instead they’d wanted to leverage his charm as a revenue stream itself. Parallel to the text. There were always “rock star” Authors in the past, of course, but they had never been so dependable... instead, the Houses needed the digital replicability of pop—a boy band of Writers; at least he’d stopped them short of choreographing dance steps for him.

Shit, that was years ago. Still, that was why no one took him seriously now. Not when he’d complained of being edited. Not ever. “Child stars,” right? Oh fuck! And of course, Emlen knew! He looked over at Emlen, feeling sickened.

“I understand you might be uncomfortable at the reading, Graham. It will be everything you’ve left behind.” Oh, how snide could he be?

By the time Graham had formed his Series—one of the first of the groups—the garage-style Author had long gone out of style. Yeah, anyone could bang out a book, but readers wanted something edited to a real production shine. Grammar torqued to its tolerance limit. They were called *Word Play*. That was when he had lost creative control.

The idea was to have a couple of plug and play groups, five or six Writer types, close in style, but different enough there'd be one of them for each of the demographics. With a dangerous poet for their face; curtained by his popular, floppy hair; which had still not taken him solo successfully. Five of them in *Word Play*, made to attract sensitive young scholars who'd have been too frightened by the hardcore theorists. They presented interlinked readings to crowds larger than any they could've had by themselves; they were even filmed a few times. Graham had envied his Series mate Surith, who'd earned the title "dangerous"; a male reparations Writer, who all the girls had inexplicably loved—bad, but oh so damaged.

It didn't last long. Popular nonfiction had quickly become more cost effective to crowd source than to commission, and most of them went quietly into post-fame postdocs. But Graham still saw posters and ads for the fictitious groups now and then.

"Will they be watching us?" he asked Emlen while they climbed out onto Tottenham Ct. It was still early, even after they'd double-crossed the Tube-line several times; Emlen having vouched payment for him—so naked as he was without his mobile. Down on the trains he'd noticed all those bounds, hidden behind and under the seats, that he'd always just thought were rubbish before.

"They might be, it's hard to tell who might be one of their spies, but as I said, they won't act against us out in the open." Emlen was still in his outlandish gear, though even with his gun bulging from his pocket, no one seemed to care.

As he was hustled, Graham told Emlen about watching for readers in the pub last night, "Oh, absolutely! True literates have a vested interest in either side of our fight. 'Readers,' we call them—with a silent 'double-you,' 'wreaders.'" Pronounced just like "reader," but with a sneer. "All of them, just like those who'd have read Latin in the Middle Ages, they'll see patterns where others see only noise, and might think to alert the authorities." Emlen slipped a ruined bound into a recyc bin and walked away from the station.

"Where are we going exactly?" Graham was sweating, as if the water were breaking from the frozen skin of his face. From the irreparable damage to his cryo'd

corpse.

“To the Panoptic Store.” On Regent, a four-storey box of glass, full of nothing but shelves and open space. All the Houses had their own storefronts. Emlen and Graham managed to rush their way up to it for ten, just as the lines picketed outside were beginning to filter inside. With the *N*King’s Men* performing, the audience—which had been queued around the block—was composed mainly of teenaged girls and their mothers. The bloggers were there for Daniel, however, the lead of the Series. He’d just won the national “Poetaster” award the week before.

The rush inside was terrible! Emlen and Graham, thankfully, already had names on the list—Graham was a little impressed despite himself.

They were stripped of everything they had on them—except that the guards never touched Emlen’s gun, *Where did he put it?* Instead, it was Graham who had his belt buckle taken for security purposes. Then they entered onto the creaking, frosted glass flooring upstairs.

Thinking of the dizzyingly clear structure of the library of the undead, Graham said, “Less vertigo here on the ground than there was last night.” Emlen shot him a warning glance. Graham shut his face.

Under the stage level was the showroom, bare white and lined with shoulder height, draftsman-style shelves. The art bounds were each face up, three feet of shelf space to each volume. In the lounge areas there were low, minimalist couches and standing lecterns, which doubled as touch screen access for ordering book versions of the printed bounds. Around the few shoppers browsing, there were hovering “Erudite” assistants, who offered brilliant literary insight on their choices—finally! It was a real job for lit grads. “If you liked this book, you might like texts from these Writers...” Not as well indexed as a database—but then, they were only paid by commission.

Above that was the stage area, where the two of them stood at the back of the audience, filled with girls clutching vinyl *N*Kings* book jackets, or blank collector’s sleeves to be signed. Great. Graham checked, only to find that the bar behind them was closed—but that the candy shop was open. *I haven’t had anything since last afternoon,*

and they're offering me fucking M&Ms. What he really needed was something stronger. Needed the expectation of the chill. Emlen looked over at him, and deftly captured a flute of champagne from a passing waiter, once destined for a private party of bloggers.

“Take this, I have to go mingle.” Then he disappeared into the press of fans—against the young “wreaders.” Graham guessed that they must all own shares in these Writers, and so had an investor’s bloodlust. Half the ampule of bubbly was already gone as he tried to decide whether to stay close to the news people, or to squeeze flatly against the wall. How could he know what the hell to do? It was like being in a room full of informants. He looked after Emlen while he finished the glass; he would’ve thought Emlen would stand out more, but he couldn’t track him. The large, bright room must’ve had standing room for a thousand people, and it was packed. Nearby, down there by the back, kids huddled round their screens, sharing chapter and verse with each other. No, they weren’t wreaders at all, but self-styled Writers of the Metatext. . . . Maybe that was all any of them really were now. Graham lowered his head and stayed out of their way.

A cover Series came on first to open the show, just a band of local kids with popular, but derivative works. They sounded good, but probably only had those few paragraphs, spliced into the existing texts of others’. Where one began and the seed text ended Graham couldn’t tell. The five of them were dressed in similar suits—though none actually well enough to fully match another—shuffling right and back in a cut-up performance of the *Kings*’ own moves. Graham looked around at the crowd who’d paid for the *N*Kings*, he saw that while most of them were watching the opening, each of them probably had the same kind of work out on the Metatext. It didn’t last long. Young girls who sported the same tall Mohawks as their mothers whooping for the locals to get off the stage, toffee-apple scented paisley scarves twirled in the air aggressively.

The support Series weren’t on long before their short works were exhausted and they exited. Then the lights went up throughout the hall. The very opposite of a concert. When the Series came on, the audience cheered. There were four young, pretty boys and a token, bi-curious girl for the pubescent lesbians. The audience cheered and called out for favorite passages, while the *N*Kings* posed and began to recite. It wasn’t like Manoj from the night before; it was more textual than performance—defending a thesis from

your jaded professors. Call and response, while the other members of the Series read msgboard comments, and the Writer responded in kind. There were cheers when members of the audience recognised their own metanarratives. It wasn't spontaneity, it was drama. In the script and light Graham felt the safest he'd felt in... shit, in hours!

He remembered when *Word Play* had split-up.

“What the fuck are you doing to us, Surith?” Graham had thrown up his hands. They'd been together just under two years, most of them with a couple of hit chapters or articles. Graham had been working on a whole concept text by then—and had been for the whole time they'd been together. Nothing was new. Just repeating the same tired arguments again and again from before the group had been formed. He was tired of it and wanted more.

“I want to experiment, Gray!” He had been experimenting, of course, in designer retardation drugs. “It's about new pathways into the old brain. I want us to stay current. The new groups are into Socratic composition, I know you can do it too.” Yeah, sure he could.

“And then what? After we argue a thesis on stage?”

“We claim first rights to the derivatives from our audience. It's lecturing—isn't that what you wanted to be doing now, anyways? Writing by way of derivative proxy.” Surith had spent the week before being taught to write all over again, having suffered from a temporary, drug-induced Down's Syndrome. Education was his “new” thing.

“Yeah I wanna teach, not make people guess about what I mean.” Graham—“Gray”—was becoming a purist.

But Surith was certain, and the Series had gone along with him. Even after they'd gone ahead, however, booking clubs and access centres by their new theme, it'd come to blows. Arguing on stage, hitting out at each other's key concepts.

“Our front man wants us all to believe in his post-feminist malaise, that it's a true and tragic nature, not only a clever demeanor.” Which had been a low blow from Graham even then.

Surith took a hold of his slick waistcoat—material a minuscule, repeating TM: the D&G knitting the fabric, his coat not actually made by Gabana, but licensed from their style. The other hand taking the hat from his head, which had held the transmission gear for his headset. “While your hewing to outmoded forms of ‘Authorism,’ Graham, is merely solipsistic at best, and narcissistic at worst.”

Graham had stood—shocked—angrily trying to think of a comeback. Then he’d decided on the bomb.

“Well then, you can quote him on that.” And he’d taken his own mic off, from where it’d been stuck over the right aorta. Walking from the stage, he pasted the skin-toned plaster of it against a speaker, so that when Surith had tried to retort, the squeal had defiantly split their Series like a tumorous fruit.

Throughout the first encore, Emlen had returned to him, nodding for them to leave. Heading down the glass stairs he said, “I just met the rep of the Agent I originally used to Ransom my bound—and yes,” he said at the shock that provoked, “I know how bad an idea the Ransoms are, Graham! I released all the research notes and metadata of mine out onto the Amazon catalogue once I’d taken ownership.” Of course he had. “I arranged that one through the Agent, outside of a Retreat in the Caribbean. Now I’ve learnt there’s a similar text being developed. If the last was vulnerable, I thought this might be the target for a Ransom, too. The Agent has information that it might be, that the Writer’s holed up on an NDA at a camp off of Greece. That matches my intel.”

“We’re going to a Retreat on an island?” Jesus! “For what you think will be a handover? You said you wouldn’t get me involved in any Ransoms, Emlen. That’s hardcore data piracy. . . . I’ve heard stories about what they do with Ransoms.”

Emlen nodded, “And those stories you’ve heard are probably true. This goes further than anything you’ve had to deal with before. If what I think is true, and what’s happened to your book, and to my bound is connected, then this could be big. Ransoms and book piracy are one thing, but this is changing the text and the metadata record itself, to hide the books away forever. The Houses and the Metatext can’t handle this, it

could lead to disaster! You can still help me and find out what's gone wrong. I'm a professional, Graham, we can do this together." But he only appeared to be offering Graham an option.

"I guess I'm already in it." Graham. In resignation.

Emlen nodded again. "We've got until this evening to make a meeting with Robert for our tickets to the Retreat, until then we've got to keep moving, London is too hot for the both of us now. I've a lead on where the man who took my bound—and yours—will strike next." Then they were out onto the street and going north, and Graham watched out every direction.

Nanograph Five

Undisclosed Location — Two Years Ago

Cachet sprayed the numbing solution over the smartwire. Waited the proscribed five beat, then confidently—or at least a skillfully performed mugging of the same—slipped himself between the strands. That gimmick was definitely worth his expense. Better than having to leap twelve feet over a live security sys.

He had true confidence striding through the main building after that stunt. After all, given the security of the compound, and that intrinsic to the material itself... Well, there weren't many men of his expertise in the world. Why should the guards worry about his strange kind of esotericism?

The few guards he met shared a queer kind of knowing humour with him instead. Of course he'd integrated himself with them, played a part of their shift, but as far as he knew, they were really there for the same reason he was: to get the bound. It didn't matter. After he'd shaken his tail—and could that really have been the same Polish Agent as had warned him off, so long ago? Hell, who knew what was possible with an Agent? —Once she had been lost, what was the real danger?

Of course he knew that defacing bounds by off-keying print was dangerous sport. He'd been caught at it before; finally downed in the Shetlands. He never knew which of the Houses they'd come from: Panoptic Macmillan? Or maybe it had been Random. Or worse yet, freelancers trying to make a name for themselves. Still, all they'd done was to drive him deeper underground.

And there he was, hacking again. Breaking into a Library. Past the walls, and ready for the security inside. Only an artiste could have forged the entry documents cold-press. Cachet looked at the apparently low-res ID: microdots and holographic watermarks. Security could never believe that anything too slick for a computer to hack could be cracked. And yeah, it would've been almost impossible to break the encryption and print authorisation with a system. Cachet had done it with a nano-scale variant of the Guttenberg. And style.

He flashed the "secure" hardcopy ID on entry and walked down the hallway.

He was on a mission.

He hadn't started like this, not as an artiste lit-hacker, just as a lowly jockey. He had been employed out of school as a print-monkey. He was perfect for the position, just young enough to have no vestigial reverence for the bound. And very hungry. They might call them "Arts&Crafts," but that was only marketing. Working at a publishing desk with reader-response data and formulae, he had known it was science. Like old style hacking. Nights with stim hunched over an arrangement table. Well, at least it had the "cachet" of an obsolete vocation.

But it hadn't been enough. He'd sat in their ergonomic, Escher nightmare, picking a meal from a confused Greek-Indian fusion takeaway, and staring at unstitched reams of fiction. Popular fantasy. Self-helps. It started so innocently, in the subtle joy of corrupting a bound. In subverting meaning. A little like writing benign computer virii; in intricate signatures—the way a dentist scrapes marks into a filling—marking backdoors into the system. The way scribes might once have done in Egypt, stamping themselves onto papyrus and into history.

There were tricks to it. The bounds were computer scanned to within a micron of human tolerance, but the systems read the page bonds in a long strip of two-D flat-scan; an artiste had to think in more than that. He learned to build ink molecule by molecule for bound master copies; an artwork in four-Ds. Drilling patterns through the bond sheets, making divergent meanings through the time-displacement of a reading.

The fantasy print? He'd built a flick-book into it. Along the ragged right edge of the justification. Cachet remembered waking in cold sweats for weeks afterward, dreaming of death under tons of pulped bounds. But nothing.

Then he'd begun showing off, doing more than graffitiing game code in amongst bond, and begun off-kerning—manipulating the spaces between letters—displacing certain words, and hacking into their sensibility. Setting new resonance amongst the literary meaning, so that what a reader believed they were getting was in fact hijacked by his own interpretation. As the readers ended a page, they would land on his own stress, were left with his thoughts. It'd been the new linguistic warfare. The medium really was the message.

Cachet began reading theory, etymology and ontology.

The tools had been out there, and they had been watching over them. How naive

had he been for fuck's sake? His House sent by an Agent.

That time, they'd offered him a job—be their double-agent—or else. That was when he knew there would be no going back. He accepted. And then he'd run from them, as far and as down into the gutter as he could make it.

It had been onto the streets for him. For hire. With solo work out in New York, Cachet had started off by knifing dealers and antiquarians for the independents, but had finally worked his way up from the street. Then he'd worked for German and Japanese firms, hacking copy for training manuals. Re-writing bounds with fine font needles, like a master tattooist on bond. It paid, but wasn't inspired—he laughed at his own pun.

The Houses had caught him again during an audit of the Shetlands, but they'd been light on him because he was freelance. Nothing was sure, though he couldn't remember a whole three days of that trip. And then his year of convalescence afterward. He should never have been able to work again.

That message should have been clear.

But no... this new job offer had come. From this strange man and his neon goggles. A second chance. To re-purpose these hidden, Ransomed bounds, changing them oh so subtly so they'd not scan by a reader the same as their source text. Why? Cachet knew better than to ask, and almost better than to guess: Ransoming the bound isn't enough; it needed to be hidden even further...

Cachet strode through the security and into the vault. Inside, the cleanroom was fitted with drawer after drawer of locked boxes. It had all gone right so far. Good. True artistes never had to sully themselves with tackling guards and plebeians.

Instead, he cracked the bound deposit box, hearing the telltale, synesthetic whiff of nitrogen. Inside, a black-bound book, no title, no Writer citation. That was it. He'd been cautioned that both its bond and bindings were designed for degeneration: "be careful," he had been told. Whoever his employer was, Cachet was insulted by the implication that he wouldn't have been otherwise.

There was only one-way to get this bound out. The sys would be searching for textual matches as he ran. He'd have to perform print surgery right there, in-situ. He touched his Guttenberg, the deck, and its quiver of alloy tipped font needles. He was back on the job, working on a Ransom. He had his work and his pride. Pulling on his

half moon goggles, he slipped the font needles into the tips of his typesetter's gloves—the Kruegers. His eight fingers and two thumbs now having grown their terrifying razor nails, he begun expertly clawing at the bound. Literature hacking was his life.

Chapter Six

Christy

London — Camden — One Year Ago

They'd spent the first few months after Christy had joined the new Collective by debating how best to steal an Espresso Book Machine. Since bounds had become so subversive, even old printing tek *itself* had become illicit. They'd spent countless meetings arguing about it, with all the new members and their views. New, because after bringing in Christy, Samanya and his sister Shades had gone on a drive, recruiting for their movement. The problem was, they had recruited their new members from amongst the worst of radicals. The new members were some serious activists, coming over from their own obsessions, attracted by the cachet of the Collective's obsolete cause.

Six of them were there over dinner, making new plans, and talking about how the project was coming along. Not very well—not from their, “Always action!” point of view, anyways. Pick-pocketing cheap softcover bounds from curb side stalls, from where their readers had innocently put them down, or from the goldmine of the Tube. What was the good in that? “Where was the group going?” they asked.

Christy thought of the reports she'd heard on the news, of apparently “random” muggings, and knew that must have been the new recruit's work. The vandalism of recyc bins? That might've been them as well. Bins set alight, the fire-retardant bounds inside having slowly smoldered away hotly, until the outer shells of the steel cubes had cracked and the whole contraption burst into a fireball. Perhaps they had been covering their tracks? No one had been hurt, but that wasn't the kind of attention she wanted for the Collective. Not yet. The security contractors, the insurance providers, they had to have known the value of the bounds being stolen; but not yet who would've thought to take them from the streets? ... It was getting to be too suspicious. She'd spoken to Sam about it, and he'd agreed to talk to them. And to his sister. *Too sweet*, she'd thought, feeling badly, using him for her illicit ends. Christy wished that the publishing industry really did work the way he naively hoped it did—but *it's only time before I'll have to work directly with Shades*... She alone seemed prepared for the worst to happen. It

would have to be the two of them—Christy and Shades—who really built this collection.

“Is this how we want to proceed? To play our hand like that over a pile of useless softs?” Sam had shook his head at her, more appalled than Christy had secretly hoped he’d be. Taking those bounds had really only been the crassest of opportunisms. She’d seen it herself, going out with the Collective—like one of Fagin’s children.

They’d gone out in two groups of three, to the shelters and stations of London. Amongst the self-assembling flotsam and jetsam of time. There in the stations, they had found an unexpected boon of prints and bounds. At St Pancras, the Euro travelers eagerly dropped whatever bound bulk they had—and how grateful they were then! Both the Collective for the bounds; and the backpackers, for not having to pay such great carbon vestibule taxes.

Less satisfactory were the trips to the shelters—the dressing up had reminded her of past wet works missions. Dressing in the carefully planned, fashion obsolescence of mass-produced philanthropic programming. The wonderful bourgeois relief of helping the poor with last season’s fashion. The homeless and unemployed had a use for the offline bounds and were known to collect and trade amongst themselves. What did they have to lose? The Collective went down to the shelters and the surrounding streets, either swapping bounds they already had multiples of, or if there was a cache they just had to have, fighting and threatening the disadvantaged for it.

Easy bond. It wasn’t unheard of for literary detectives to strong-arm the homeless readers for clues toward book fraud. Of fraudsters having laundered bounds through the bum literati.

The dangers we went through, Christy thought, The lengths. Risking capture, risking Inspiration, for the Collection.

That’s why a Book Machine would’ve made the bulk of their stock so much easier to develop. The book machines were fixtures in publisher’s storefronts and at larger paperback dispensaries. Mutant offspring of a printer’s press and photocopier—at least the size of an old photocopier—it wouldn’t be easy to pocket one. But the debate had

still raged. Every bound, soft or Arts&Craft, had a license number printed in nanodots throughout its print, hundreds of references per inch that made tracking them to their source printer easy. Every bound was a numbered copy of a Gold-standard original held in the King's Cache; the standard version that guaranteed Writer rankings, underscoring all House trading on the Metatext. They were inviolate.

The argument went: that if they could source their own EBM—the Book Machine—then they could make their own unlicensed copies, breaking that link in the forensic trail. They had been investigating other laundry treatments to blur those digits, but that was hard going, and none so far without irreparably damaging the bounds themselves. Christy's own, more successful—and more secret—work, highlighted how dangerous those codes could be to them. The danger in those codes was an inversion of the old fear of being tracked online; it was a baseless fear in the sea of the Metatext, but all too real to follow the fingerprints of the bounds.

So even given the problems in stealing an EBM, she hadn't quashed the discussion.

The true problem was in getting non-volatile ink. Commercially available ink had long only been temporary, due to its bacterial biodegradability; the more industrial inks imposing a health and environmental risk deemed unsatisfactory by regulations. As a controlled substance—true ink was reserved only for the Houses and their Arts&Crafts—it wouldn't be easy for them to get.

Given that, Christy wasn't so sure how successful they could really be. Instead, she and Sam had been making bigger plans. Grand designs. Though every time he got too interested in just how she planed on pulling off the next stage, she'd had to problematise their sexuality once again—his propriety, never mixing business with pleasure, was just too exploitable! She fought him off with greater attention. And there had to be a bigger score. They needed it. Sam had seemed unaware of the urgency, but Christy could see the fear of looming irrelevancy in Shade's eyes—when rarely uncovered. Their patron's money would eventually dry up. But how to find that big score?

Eventually, she'd had to call in an old favour; reconnecting with her data fence. The publishing industry ran on data, and metadata was like the exposition of that data. It told you all the details of a work; where it was, of course, but also how it'd been produced. Stage directions, and how it'd actually been performed. Christy knew that properly tracked metadata—and publishers wanted nothing more than exactly that, the best to target ads; backbone of the Metatext economy—was like flight data. Very proprietary. Very valuable. Very bad to steal. She had her sources. While a text was free-access, its demographic keys were much harder to get.

Clinton was a data miner. When they'd first met she'd laughed! After getting into the business she'd done her own research on bounds and librarians in history; on old film, pre-media-convergence. He was in his fifties, silver-haired and wore tweed. A true Pre-Millennium kid—then again, weren't they all “kids” now—Clinton wore glasses like a cyborg, and not like her own affected augmentation. He looked so frail she had laughed at him, until she realised that everything he wore was functional for a miner. He wasn't a Librarian or an Agent, just a hardcore old guy who'd never given in—after all, what did all those passé hackers finally become?

He said he liked London for its data proliferation. How the Metatext of tourist sites drowned out his own signal. They met then at the Tower Cafe, her mobile having quaked-out at its Metatext event horizon, deadened a hundred feet out. *Good disguise, Clinton.* They were absolutely invisible there.

“Christy, I never expected to hear from you again.” They'd bought in their own drinks, and saluted with them. “You've been sleeping I take it?” He'd been nervous. *Rightly so. If he thinks I might have changed Houses...* But there he was, *He must have had to know for sure.* It was his business to be curious, after all.

“This isn't business, it's about pleasure.” He'd grinned at that, Christy had something on him, and maybe now that wouldn't have to be repaid, but could instead be balanced-out? “I want to track the distribution channel of some bounds.”

He looked surprised at that. “That's not my area of expertise. I could get it for you of course, but I can't actually guess what you'd use it for. Those things are locked down,

there's no gray market for them, and the blacker markets wouldn't be interested in anything so easily found." She imagined him trying to put it together. That was what scored it for her; no one considered the value for wide access print. "You want actual transit data? By the ounce, those bounds are worth more than gold; those routes are closely guarded secrets, changing all the time."

"No, Clinton, I don't want the transports, I want a root source analysis. Find me when and where the bounds are being printed."

He rocked backward, shocked. "Some pleasure you're into!" But he was interested. "If this was business, it'd cost you."

"It isn't, however. There's no corporate expense account now, and if there were, I wouldn't have anything as leverage on you after all." Turned out Clinton had had a side game in aiding defectors, and so far she'd rather unfairly milked him for favors off that fact. And almost one too many at that.

He'd smiled, "I wish I knew what this was about."

Oh, she knew he did!

It was from the information Clinton had sourced for her that had put them there, preparing for their first real heist. As they waited for their entry window, pulling at the jumpsuits that were then inching up their bums, they talked.

"You already know I got into this job from out of animal rights activism," Lisa had nodded at Shades, who'd dealt with that side of the recruitment drive, whilst Samanya had brought in the biblio-freaks—like Christy herself. "I had to get away from that for a while though, there were troubles in Mongolia." They'd all desperately wanted to know what her "troubles" had been, of course, perhaps thinking of how they were all inevitably going down for the lark they were in on now. Christy had known where it was likely to end up. Right here. *We're bonding now. Right?* "You saw that picture of the Labrador—what was left of her—the pic that went viral from the fur farm? I was there, we... we released them. The whole thing was messed up."

Christy had seen that picture, and more, after the mink they had released went more than cannibalistic in starvation.

“Well, when I came back here to the UK,” Lisa continued, “Laying low. I couldn’t connect with my own underground, but then Jada found me. I still have to do something worthwhile, right? And I saw it immediately when she spoke to me.”

Shades smiled curtly, in understanding. Turned out that Samanya had been Jada’s sponsor, bringing her in from Jamaica. “I worked in a farm there myself: a content farm. Kids grew up cultivating Metatext, while the adults learnt how to stitch bond and print. When I came over here from those sweatshops, I realised how worthless we had all been. All these bounds might be high cost, but they’re just objects, not at all valued for the effort in making them.” Once Christy had known that, her violent proclivities made so much more sense; Jada was angry: she was herself a rebuttal for the very ideal of the death of the printer—the now fashionable theory of virgin Writership. “Sam and I are at opposite ends of the spectrum, his being into the thing itself; but I showed him what we did, the craft marks in the bond itself.” She smiled.

“And you, Christy? How about you?” asked Lisa.

She had shaken her head. “I just love stories—I love bounds.” That was as far as they shared.

After bypassing the top level systems, Christy fell through the fence into the spill trough. Most of the warehouse was below ground; the weight of its bulk requiring more support than mere walls could provide. She’d never seen any actual plans, only the strange re-zoning that’d gone through the year before the long construction had begun; that alone gave her a strong idea of what they were dealing with: it was huge. There weren’t any records of what exactly was buried under all the surrounding, low-res buildings. From above it was only a mound, two-storey max, but with screeds of smartwire around the perimeter.

She stopped for a moment, holding her step, thinking of the test rod she’d used on

that wire: it had extended from the fence, trapping the rod's alloy in coils so fast, that when it had tightened it'd spun right out of her hand—metal neatly ring barked as if by a rabid goat. She did not want to go out that way... but it was one hell of a great indication that she really was onto something big.

The trick of the motion sensors was to walk without rhythm. That wasn't going to be the real problem: she knew the kind of guards Houses employed. It was almost a joke, that, their security supplied by dogs and blind men—neither of whom could read the precious bounds they were employed to protect. It would have been funny, except for how smart it was. Sure, most blindness could be corrected via cybernetic surgery, but there were still those atavists who held out. Held out for the advantages their blindness gave. People born with the old, trained allergy; viral engineering gone wild near the beginning of the Millennium. Linking the blind, through itches and sniffles, to their guide dogs. The police loved 'em, but only House security could afford them. There would be Gestalts roaming these grounds.

She'd gone around Sam and brought in his sister Shades, then her own militant protégé Lisa, the only two in the whole Collective who'd shown the promise for this kind of work. They had entered at different points, operating on mobile silence. She thought she'd trained them well enough. Now, having climbed along the moat, with handholds up the clay that had fallen in on the concrete, she reached the killing grounds and wondered how true that could end up being.

Christy was almost caught unawares. The dog had been silent, but the woman growled. The blind woman's eyes would have been closed under her blank glasses, while the gentle pins of the braille head-up display butterfly kissed her lids, following Christy's movements against her delicate skin. Gestalts were hyper sensitive—raw by their senses—but not so discerning. For that, Christy had donned a scented tatter-cloak—even using the leviathan smell of whale oil, just a drop of her bare supply; so slick the spacers still used it for lube; nothing yet that synth tek could match. What the hell would those two animals have thought of her? What monster had come, emerged from the earth? Of course, then she'd had to strike both at once, that or their bio-circuit would have cut out of rhythm and tripped the alarm regardless.

Both of figures flew ten feet from her thrust. Christy's hands held extant, past where the guards' vitals had been. *Follow through.* Struck dumb and out. *Well*, she thought, *At least the dog won't hold a grudge.*

She loped over the blank space. Stopped at an exhaust well, where the wind blew at more than a hundred and sixty Fahrenheit, and she knew then that whatever was underground really was vast—a heat and convection pattern like that filled a sketch of miles of tunnel in her head. The plume of heat must have been like a solar flare—perhaps they'd a trained Jetstream overhead, to smear the tell of it away? *It just goes to prove me right...* Having uncoiled her own smart-wire, programmed with a high tensile spring, she looped it round her body loosely and dropped limply through the access-way.

With the minute drag of trailing her fingertips along the concrete, the wire flexed around and above her—like a lazy harness. Her unshielded hands and feet strafed along the contoured mag-fields of inlaid wires as she passed, the strobe lighting of the fields flashing routinely in her head.

The tunnel shot away above her, but her eyes were level, uselessly clawing at the blurred concrete equator zipping around her.

She couldn't actually “read” fields via the implants she'd had placed in her fingers and toes. No, the sense was more like that of touch-typing; a lizard-brained contextual muscle memory. When she hit a hundred and fifty words a minute, the density of the oscillating current told her to stop. She flexed her gut, and the wire squeezed against her, holding her there in a retroactive tenderness.

At least she'd been right not to expect fan blades down the bottom of the shaft, that wasn't the way of data centres—complexes that made their own weather, flushing themselves without further mechanical aid. She pried her way between the exhaust slats, and out onto a human access-way. Breaking through, she looked up, and Christy figured she must have fallen almost ten stories. Around her, the store was cut into gridlines, and along the narrow canyon ahead, the depot appeared to cut that same ten storey length.

Where to from here—her confusion cut itself short. Along the cleft in front of her,

she saw a machine hurtle straight toward where she stood. All steel whiskers poking, hissing canisters. It abruptly thudded into its clamps, stopping in the cradle directly before her. All around there were muted thumps like distant shells, and Christy realised this was only one of many machines. Bound delivery cartridges. To either side of her, the warehouse was a gargantuan, acoustic cube of dull steel. Fifty feet to her right, a hundred to her left. It was lit in that strange un-light of bound collections. She figured that along every ten feet or so would be another fissure like the one she stood at, each with its own bristling retrieval bot.

Such robotic warehouses weren't unusual for produce, computers playing three-D Tetris with sealed, coded boxes. No human could retrieve anything from all that, 'bots instead recalling objects stored non-serially and dropping them, un-manned into shipping bays. No one went inside while they were working. Not and kept their head. Christy looked at the whizzing machines. No one—and Christy had heard all the dumb stories. Now she strode along to row sixteen, and climbed up onto the resting machine's back.

There was only a two-foot give between her and the steel canyon, and she had to hold herself arched away from the antenna spikes. Checking her chrono, synched within thirty picoseconds of the orders they'd placed... she braced... Thump! Shot twenty feet straight up—to crunch—a grind of gears, then the ting of springs shooting guidelines into rails, and a wrenching acceleration of sixty, past a number of intersecting cuts. To a sudden stop that almost threw her from place. She attempted to slacken her cramped grip. Tried to look around for her target. But could only screw up her eyes, while there was a flash of converging angles of IR, blasted over the maze-like machine code that glyphed apparently unbroken walls. Peeking, she saw a nimble fork then twisting from out the bot under her, and push through a storage faceplate, pulling a sealed cartridge free.

The machine had returned to rest along the same route, when she heard a cowboy “Woop!” echo—stupidly—and abruptly cut-off. That must have been one of the other two, *Idiots*. At the dock, the storage compartment then cracked open with a hiss of nitrogen, and before it could transition the bound to its vac-tube, she picked it free.

Spices, pages not bound but compound, treated spice and herbage, pressed and sequenced as it was indexed. A trans-sense reference work, textured both olfactorily and to taste. Then she rode on further. To a puzzle book, each page of its bound edition mechanically locked to each other by a trick. She couldn't tell whether it was written more for an adult or a child.

One main problem they had with these warehouses was the total lack of human-centric controls, you couldn't just tell the computer what to collect—without hacking the private House darknet—however, Clinton had been able to match order histories to demand, and to precisely anticipate supply output. The three retrieval shuttles they rode were set to pick bounds, to fill legitimate orders—as their packet speeds had been anticipated by Clinton. They simply had to collect the product, while they piggybacked along those requests, and lifted them first. She ended up with just one dud that hadn't matched what they wanted, but four out of five wasn't too bad.

They went out by the distribution tubes—she'd never actually thought her training in surviving explosive decompression was going to come in useful. No one—but no one—messed with those corporations who thought to ship bounds to orbit, or who then imported them from null-gee industrial plants back to terra; even when those exotic structures were the best of the picks. She opened her mouth and relaxed, breathed out. Went limp. Following that procedure, she hadn't ruptured. Though Lisa ended up with a perforated eardrum, and loudly called, “What've we got?” Excited, while she still sluggishly buttoned her shoulder bag, stupidly wiping a trickle of blood from her right ear. That must have alerted the working man. It should've been another fully auto'd supply depot, but she had to fletchette the poor blue-collar. What the Hell was he doing there? She hit him with a non-explosive, low-yield kinetic spray. She'd rather not have done that. But still, nothing else to it.

She cut for silence. Both the other women had shut it as she'd fired her fletcher, the only noise of it being the “hoomp!” of the man's breath knocked away. Maybe they needed the reminding, though? Christy used the break, just the way she would in a class of children, to reorientate them. Then she took off down to bay twelve. Another advantage of the globalised corporations; the homogenised work layouts; used to be only

hotel chains were the same round the globe. Now even the truck bays were predictable—like home.

They got out of there directly, splitting off into pre-drilled bolt-holes. Part of the beauty of House security, was that their public barely knew they existed at all; the greatest trick the Devil ever performed, etcetera. What the public *did* know was basically the endpoint magic trick. The high-end bounds were, otherwise, the almost invisible currency of the upper echelons. No one really knew where they came from. So while the warehouse was so cleverly patrolled, it was actually best protected by its own tight obscurity, so was easy to slip free of; with no civilian stragglers to catch them as they fled, just empty neighborhood.

It was a foolish heist after all that. Christy had been aware enough to ask that Clinton sourced them bounds by code, and not from their own requests. When she'd considered the job, her prize wish list had grown exponentially. But she knew they'd all have their dream editions. What she hadn't wanted was for their treasure map of metadata to trail back to them, where they could've then been targeted by their mapped reading histories. That affectation had indeed been successful, but Clint had still been wiser than that. He had told her those bounds held in distribution were too unique for gray market sale, and not enough for the true black buyers. She had thought that was just about right for their collection—enough to get them a name in the right circles, at least... But she'd been so wrong.

Metadata again. The bounds they held—not just those they were planning to on-sell for kitty-cash—must be cleaner than that. Apparently, the catalogue of the collection would show a signature as it was built through time. They would have to consider not only what they picked, but from where and when. As it turned out, those bounds were useless to them, that methodology was wrong; otherwise the collection itself would be too aware. Hold too much of an identity. The Collective just didn't have the expertise to spoof the bound's metadata—every single time they spoke of a bound? References. Leading an expert right back to their particular referencing voice. And to their haul.

They'd need expertise to beat that rap.

“What the hell would we need a ‘librarian’ for? They’re ancient news!” said Jada, more angry with Christy than the far-fetched idea of it.

“Librarians are far from dead.” Christy knew that all too well. “They’re the masters of metadata—the stuff that manages the ‘text. Writers and Houses might produce the books you read, but it’s them that make it worthwhile; they track readers, and turn that data into the ad money the Houses live on. You know the Houses put their books out on the ‘text, free-access? Well that isn’t by choice, but instead by design. That’s the deal they’ve got with the Librarians.”

But it wasn’t an easy relationship. After all, who’d want to share their profits, their *lives*, on sufferance? The Houses weren’t only in competition with one another; they also resented the very presence of Librarians. Still, it was normally a cold war between them, and none were ever able to take the upper hand—*Not with all the Agents around. Ha!* Still, the war had flared-up on occasions before. No one ever sat easy...

“Then we need a Librarian?” asked Samanya.

“No, they’re far too dangerous,” replied Christy, curtly and to his bemusement, while she tried to form a plan of her own.

While that was one thing she was certain of: they wouldn’t get a Librarian; they would still need an architect.

Nanograph Six

New York — Midtown – Two Years Ago

“But is it actually publishable?” asked the General Editor.

Since Conti had been headhunted from off the street, he had learnt to fear that phrase. He stalled, and turned back, looking over his displays.

They were in the R&D meeting room, with Lachlan the GE—his scarred face in the same perpetual grimace as ever. There was a story that his cut was just the reason House Hatchet had its name... it was certainly how he’d earned the title “General” during the Crypto Wars.

Conti’s three Development team members left him hanging there by himself, and the heads of Publishing, Print, and Design law for the House looked on. After the first glance, as he’d entered the room, they had all ignored the one Librarian in the corner. Thought of the man shook Conti’s composure for a moment, why on Earth would he be here?

No. He tapped on his feeder and brought himself back. Constantine—Conti to all but his most devout family members—had been on this project for over six months, and he had numerous draft plans. This was the one.

He tried to ignore the black hole in the room...

Business was hard and the Houses were almost in all-out war with each other now. This would be a market-capturing achievement.

And Conti knew how cruel the Houses could be. When he’d been headhunted by Hatchet from Panoptic, he had defected with a co-worker, Michael. But while they had been moved from one safehouse to another, freelancing Agents had hit them. Michael had been inked.

It had often been said that when an Editor died, they couldn’t take their Writers with them. Even then, Conti’s portfolio on the BLX808 had been trading at plus-zero-six and up. Panoptic wouldn’t have wanted to lose his Writers, and with his death their contracts would have been up for renegotiation. The House would have been offering signing preferences to anyone who could arrange that, and it had obviously been too good a chance to pass up. Christ, and his erstwhile Writers would probably have

admired the strong, new Agents who managed to kill him.

Michael had been taken by a hail of depleted darts, and Conti only just got away with his life.

“If this works out, we’ll be putting ourselves directly against the industry, we won’t be marketing these texts as books...” said James, from Publishing law.

“However, if the test cases go through—which they most definitely should—no one will be able to stop us.” Lachlan smiled at the rest of the team as they nodded, and Conti continued, “We’ll have the first step in a new market. It’ll start a new arms war while everyone else can only try to catch up. We’re well placed to launch titles, taking advantage of even the briefest window.”

The beauty of it was, they didn’t even have to talk about their readers. They would all just implicitly trust their “altruistic” publishers.

“Once we do this, once we let this... Narrative... out. Even if we control it. There will be no going back.” For the first time, it was Lachlan who seemed uncertain. Did anyone else see that?

This was where Lachlan and his pet-Librarian—in customary neon goggles—had led them... to weaponise—to “commercialise” the Inspiration.

Then from out of Conti’s blindside, “And I’ll source you writing talent as well as the material.” Sure, there must be Writers and Authors champing at the bit for this kind of opportunity... He watched, as the House team each nodded to that in unison, without looking the speaker’s way. As if they had merely had the same thought all at once. Such a trick...

“Let’s run the numbers then,” breathed the General. “You’ll be taking the delivery of the first batch, Constantine.” Lachlan nodded gravely at him, withdrawing his own custom, nickel-plated fletcher, placing it on the boardroom table between them. Conti watched as it was slid over toward him. “Earn your keep, would you?”

Back once more, into the breach of publishing.

It was his proposal, and his responsibility to make sure it worked. Conti appreciated the gesture of being given Lachlan’s support—and his gun. Conti nodded, “Hai.”

Chapter Seven

Graham

London — Victoria Line — Now

Being offline is just the same as being sober, Graham thought—nothing was wrong with it, per se, but what if everything went wrong? *What if there's a disaster? What would I do?*

And now, cut off from his mobile, Graham couldn't even tell he was being followed. Once cams had become common on commercial mobiles, it hadn't been long before the search giants had caught on to it themselves; stalking was big business. He was far too used to “nudges” anytime a profile of his was queried, and now he felt very alone. While there were ways to fool the logs—to *authentically* stalk someone—it wasn't unusual to have daily “pings” from random passers-by, those who might've stumbled upon him in a reference, or in a sideways glimpse of their glasses. That's how he'd been able to tell the most popular kids in school, by their Tourette's—or by the otherwise affected social paranoia of the faux-elite.

Emlen snorted beside him, “They do think they're being clever.” Graham paused, and looked over the side of the overpass with him. He shook his head, and Emlen had to explain, “We're being followed. Down there,” gesturing.

“The woman in mauve? I noticed her take a flexi from the idiot at the corner back there.” Graham had noticed every suspicious “wrecker” since that morning.

“What? No,” said Emlen. Graham tried again and could only see a clot of traffic, two groups of power-walking professionals meeting and tussling in the narrow shopping ways. Many of them shook their heads in confusion, whilst their stereo ear-leads buzzed in conflicting commands. “See how the crowds are busiest down there?” Emlen pointed at the mass of pedestrians. “That lane has been tagged as a low latency thoroughfare—a fast lane through the city—but now, the traffic systems also have it as an intersection. The men down there are almost walking into one another.”

“Someone's creating their own cover?” he tried. And Emlen winked at him. So

primed, Graham then looked back down on the streams of people squeezed into the narrow lane ways. Searching for more signal in the noise.

“I’m used to it, Graham. There’s always someone following me. We probably picked this tail up at the wreading,” Emlen quirked his mouth slightly in displeasure, “It was a calculated risk going there, I admit it.” But he just shrugged. “I’ll lose him.”

Emlen calmly stopped them amidst the fray of commuters, and bought them each a cup of stim. Handed a cup, Graham almost crushed the drink in his hands. *What is he doing?*

But he was told, “Drink it up. Quickly! Before the cup dissolves.” Stim melting away the gelatinised, pressed milk-froth of the mug. So Graham sucked it up quickly, while they hurried along once again.

Emlen led them down into another station, still berating their tag.

Thank God! thought Graham, *Maybe we can still lose them.* The strange thing about the Underground, was that once you were inside it, you were lost. Lost to any tracker programs. Emlen—who still had a mobile—flagged Graham as his “buddy,” and paid the higher tourist fees for his entry. While that itself red-flagged them, past the gate, it was too complex for the transport system’s weak AIs to follow where they went. Under the ground, it was a darknet, logged on entry and exit, but free of all law once within. Even most mobiles lost access in those tunnels between stations. At those peak times, the trains were black bazaars: men, women and children dressed as traveling stalls. If you could read their script, you could find almost anything—Graham, himself, had bought a watch from a young woman on the Jubilee not a year before. It was encrypted commerce, better than it was online.

He figured they must still be followed; but Graham couldn’t actually tell for sure. *I should learn to trust my feelings.* Emlen stayed in front of him, and he knew that if he had looked around behind them to check, Emlen would have quickly been lost. Graham didn’t want to risk that.

“Where are we going?” Graham called up to him, when Emlen held his hand back to help him through the chatter pollution. “Emlen?”

“Once we’re offline, we’ll head out to Heathrow and then to a ship. We’re off to Rhodes.”

“To a Retreat? What did your contact tell you?” As he was pulled through the crowd, Graham thought that Emlen must have enacted a kind of evasion protocol himself; as those dumb packets of life-blogging—the commuters—had suddenly fallen into array around them.

“Then we go to a Retreat,” Emlen nodded, “And I’ve got a job for you. If my contact is correct, and there is a Ransom going down, I won’t be able to handle both ends of the interrupt. I’ll work on preserving the data, but I’ll need you—the Writer you—to take the place of our rogue. If we can catch his buyer in the middle of the Ransom, we may be able to find out what he’s done with all the other bounds.”

“You want me to get into the middle of the handover itself?” It wasn’t the kind of surprise that it should have been. “How am I supposed to do that?” Graham was both anxious and winded.

“You’ll have to brush up on forging the patsy’s literary style. That’s how the buyer’ll know you. We have four days. Eight texts for you to study and ape. Not a lot of sleep.” He glowed. “This is my chance to get it back.”

“Then what about my bound?” Graham tightened his hand around Emlen’s. “Once you don’t need me anymore?”

“I’ll still have to put your hacker outlaws to rest, don’t worry about that. I fear there’s more to this than there seems, and I don’t like it...” Emlen trailed off, as if shifting into another layer of conversation all together. But he didn’t stop walking. “We’ll keep moving for now, our ship isn’t until this evening, but we still have to meet with Robert before then.”

From the underground they jumped up and over the streets, before heading back down toward the Tube again. Graham realised he’d never been up that way before; there were no signs or advertisements along the way, all a part of a new commerce district. Bank was a little like that, its street facade tooled smooth, with only the virtualised and flickering signifier to show where you had been. The suited men around them weren’t

reading, their movements instead supraliminal—coded into their calendars—controlled by the ear-leads that buzzed into their heads. Emlen really was taking it seriously, keeping the two of them away from any more literate environs. Graham could sense the suit's disinterest in any extended narrative; two men paused in the street, and exchanged just the detail of their availability. They moved on, weaving only a reactive itinerary together. Graham and Emlen ducked back into an underpass.

Emlen kept them moving.

By three pm Graham was exhausted, having only had a dead sleep at Robert's the night before, and Emlen finally sat down by a crowd of high-schoolers who were waiting for their bus. When it came, the two of them stayed behind—looking like perverts caught out after the sea of teens had gone—and Emlen suddenly had a new bag with him. Graham had no idea who must have passed it to him, but there it was. Emlen winked, "Can't afford to leave loose bags around in this day and age, now can we? Off we go!" He lifted it, and hailed the next bus going by. They were heading to Heathrow.

The airstrips poked upward of twenty stories or more. Each tethered five or six fixed-wing airships—hydrogen bubbles stretched to either side into a triangle of wings. At gate twelve, their gangway was still bare while the ship was being taxied over. Graham waited in the lounge, watching as it came toward them, while Emlen "freshened up"—*Or does more of his "spy" thing.* Graham looked morosely at the service bar. Emlen wouldn't buy him anything, said it would be soon enough they were trapped on the ship and could have as much as they wanted then.

Back at the window, the Dynairships were five times the size of the old Boeings; semi-transparent, flying greenhouses of biohydrogen producing algae. Jet propelled blimps, slower than a plane, but close to carbon neutral. Nothing that massive should float, but there it was, bobbing against that same kind of bubble walkway the Collective had used to break into the Atrium, *Just last night!* Graham shook his head; he couldn't believe that was less than twenty-four hours ago. *That damn blimp can't take me away from here soon enough.*

Emlen had bought him a change of clothes, but he still smelt like a bonfire. The

idea of going on to that ship was terrifying, and the trip was going to take four whole days. *There's going to be nowhere to escape.* The only escape would be oblivion. The ship—and its bar—couldn't arrive fast enough.

No one checked their passports—or asked where they were going—everything was permitted; all new locations would be updated remotely, in the immense midnight of the databases. The cameras were there to match faces with tickets, while they were covertly x-rayed, and cat-scanned for infectious memes. Somehow they passed through, and slithered up the disinfected walkway.

Underneath the canopy of the balloon, the undercarriage was luxurious. With a bamboo frame, the structure was simply an extrusion of the blimp. However, the furniture inside was old-fashioned wood, with leather settees and (mismatched) crystal chandeliers. Graham saw antique Chesterfields that must weigh more than a modern car. There was nothing so crass as a row of seats, the main passenger hold more like a grand hotel lobby than a train—but so much longer and wider than it was high. The light above them came through the blimp itself, the swimming-pool green of a dirty skylight. The likeness to sunken Titanic wasn't lost on him. The bannisters, *Which are actually made of wood*, mimed them down into the hall along a miniature grand staircase. It was all about style. With the costs of fuel down but travel times up, the airlines had needed to find another way to gouge their customers.

In fact, Graham knew two of the world's great restaurants were onboard zeppelins; but this was no *Persephone*, just the *Ariel Adventure*. Still, he saw the cocktail bar.

Emlen noted his glance. “Go on. Charge it to the ticket.”

Graham paused, “Emlen, won't they catch us at the Retreat?”

“They may know where we're going, but once we're in, they wouldn't dare interfere. It'll only be after we leave they'll move, that will be the trick. Now go relax. I'll need you early in the morning.”

The evening to drink? What else could he ask? “Will do!” Graham said, thinking that if Emlen could get him sober by then, he'd be at Emlen's service for whatever he could ask.

Emlen did catch him, just as the thrumming of the engines had finally fallen into synch with his buzz. Emlen joined him for one, answering Graham's joking, "What'll you have?" With, "A double scotch and water." But Graham knew he would never catch up. After all, in his drunk, he was feeling truly competitive.

"While I have you as wild and easy as I can, here's the brief." Emlen threw his pad onto the bar-top in front of Graham.

Graham twisted his head around to square the feeder screen in his sight, eyes matching keywords immediately. He was trained in sight-reading, too, just as much as Emlen was. What was it he saw?

"Nicolas Flemming. His bibliography." Graham thought for a moment. "Huh! I know him." Sure, they'd met at a couple of conferences.

"Really? It's a small world, after all. What do you know?" Emlen took the opportunity to swallow a half.

Graham watched him drink, but thought, *I've got to hold my own, Emlen can't win everything*. Graham concentrated. As if the poison of the alcohol could be quarantined from his brain, held in study. "Not much, actually." Graham took hold of Emlen's unfolded feeder. Swiped over the display, through a few pages, pixels reshuffling like sand back up through the hourglass. He pieced it together. "Yeah, Nick's been on the circuit for a while. I think I referenced him myself. In my thesis. I don't know him. Not well. He's your man?" Graham looked dumbly at Emlen watching him back.

Then, as if he understood him, "Oh! Haha. No, he's most definitely your own man, Graham. More so now than I'd planned. The bound I had written—patronised it myself—was about sharing; his new text is on Authorship. I'd planned on just a touch of fraud, once we were in, to pass you off as the Writer himself and thus get us closer to the villain. Perhaps, now you know him, you can approach Nicolas directly."

Right. Right. "And what are you going to be?"

"I'll be your freelance Editor—I'd rather be your Agent, that'd have given me

more chances to get around, but sadly that role isn't an option out on Retreat."

"You know I've never been traditionally published, only through academic presses?" Graham asked. "I was pretty famous, but I never had to *do* anything, never really knew what was going on. I don't understand these 'Agents' and 'Editors.'" He choked, but swallowed. "Not the way you're using them."

"You've no real need to, Writers rarely do. Agents are spies, bodyguards and literary scouts. In my own publishing life, I've never seen a job change more. Very well trained, they're a bit like the police and the enforcers of the publishing world wrapped together."

"Christ. So if they turn up?"

"Oh, I'd rather expect that they will. It's Agents who run these Retreats after all." Emlen finished his second double. "But I'll handle that part, don't concern yourself with it. Your job is to integrate yourself with the Writers who've taken up camp there. Now you understand you can't just *ask* any of them directly about a Ransom?"

"Not really. I attended some pub-law seminars, but all they ever really told us about Retreats were that they are a gray area. I got more about them over stim, and there were always rumours about ex-colleagues having Ransomed their books."

Emlen nodded, "The Retreats are demilitarised zones. Run by a loose conglomerate of Agents, they feed into the patronage system. Most Writers there are doing the right thing, working for private hire, with their research kept properly under key in the Retreat datarooms. When they're done, the readable copies get passed on to their patrons, and the metadata is released into the wild. "

Graham looked puzzled, down on his glass. "'Demilitarised'?"

"Oh yes! Retreats walk a very fine line; Patrons want the bound, and in return have to bank its metadata. But it's a potential hotbed of information laundering, too. So the Agents patrol them. The agreement is, as long as all original research and texts are maintained by the Retreat, the Librarians won't act against them."

"Shit. That's where the Ransoms come in."

“Absolutely. The Ransom is the money anonymous patrons give to own a text outright. It’s data theft pure and simple. Ironically, the Retreats are ideal for that kind of exchange. Ransoms are paid for the guarantee of exclusivity. Literally, the text bound to an object. Terrifying to Librarians, because the deal is to erase all other text and data from the Meta.”

“Right. So once we’re in, I can’t just ask anyone directly, because it’s a black market thing.”

“And I thought we’d have to stalk Nicolas covertly, but now I know you two have a connection, perhaps there’s another way; you’ll go in as ‘John Wright,’ then approach him directly as yourself. You’ll still have to learn his texts, enough to be able to satisfy a literacy signature test at the point of the Ransom, of course... and I focus on his accomplices,” Emlen nodded definitively, "But it's a start." He clapped his hand on the counter, and received a new glass from the barman for his effort.

“This is all too sobering.”

“Oh not at all! I beg your pardon, but I slipped you a detoxicant in your stim earlier, should be kicking in now. You’ll not be able to be drugged for a good few weeks.”

The response was delayed by shock. “You miserable fucker!” Graham stood, awkwardly throwing the barstool off balance behind him.

“Yes.” Emlen finished his own third, and used the empty glass to push the feeder toward Graham. “Get reading.”

They floated in to Greece, sporadically buffeted by coastal winds. Emlen’s mobile flashed twice, logging location updates for the two of them—pending transit.

“It has to be by sea from here. They shoot down anything that flies over the Retreat.” *Who does?* Emlen wouldn’t answer...

After throwing his tantrum over being drugged, Graham had taken stock of his situation: heading toward the Mediterranean, in an airship, on the run from terrorism

charges with a sociopath.

He'd sought out Emlen for more understanding. "The Houses? What do they get out of it?"

"Publishing Houses? They bankroll the Retreats. Partially as a pressure valve for the Writing talent, and also the better to give Houses options they can then manage along with the Library: for prestige. As long as their Writers still produce valued work, it doesn't actually matter to them whether they can make money directly from it, readers will buy books from famous Writers regardless."

"And you're saying we should get into the middle of this?"

"Oh, we're going to. The two of us are going to hit the Ransom, and see how far it goes."

Graham hadn't really any choice. He couldn't imagine where they were heading, but he couldn't go back. For the rest of the flight, Graham had read, and tried writing diverse essays in Nicolas' literary style. It took the full four days of the trip. Emlen wasn't impressed with it in the end, but the lit analysis program passed him.

Having reached the port and finishing a fine lunch of fish, the two of them approached the quay. Once again, Emlen's timing proved peculiarly fortuitous; the weekly trip out to Rhodes was just that afternoon.

The security around the pier reminded Graham of nothing so much as a Latin American embassy; coiled in smartwire and surrounded by machine gun stalking guards. Everything the two of them had was stripped and confiscated from them; except, once again, Emlen played his magician's trick and appeared apparently innocuous. *Where does he put his gun?* wondered Graham. In the waiting compound, the two of them were segregated from everyone else sitting, waiting for the boat. No one was allowed to talk with any other group. Not until they'd set off. Without return.

Graham wished he could just ask one of the other Writers: what could he expect?

Not that it became any friendlier upon embarking; on what appeared to be an

ancient fishing vessel, the two of them still sat alone. They seemed to be the only people on the trip properly composed to it—resigned to it. Graham could feel the tension amongst the other passengers. Each of them had taken their singular places across the boat, looking pensively out to the choppy sea: *Hemmingways, all of them*. Editors, attempting to talk them from jumping away to drown. Graham only then realised, many of them must be setting off for a year or so of lockdown.

“I can’t ask any of these guys what they’re doing here?”

Emlen shook his head, “Only if you want their Editors to shoot you. It’s tantamount to suicide for an embargoed Writer to break their deal.”

“Is the patronage—or a *Ransom*—really worth it?”

“Well, it’s different after the fact, once the text is flown, no one cares much what the Writer does. Not that they’re likely to get the chance again. They’ll be blacklisted.” He looked around at the miserable couples of talent and minders. “A little pathetic, really.” Only the one Editor had glared back at them both.

It was a gray approach to the island. Not so Greek. Graham had been expecting olive greens, washed whites and straw. But the island had once been an army base—sold almost ten years ago—its colours so solid that they were flaking and chipped. In fact, as the boat came to the dock, he saw flecks of gunmetal gray and Day-Glo targeting floating, having fallen away onto the water.

They trekked from the boat up a wired gangway to processing, where Graham saw they were being passed from machine guns over to a perimeter of blindfolded men and dogs. *Weird*.

However, the man Graham was placed in front of was perfectly clear-sighted as he asked, “Tickets, ID, patronage.” Graham had asked Emlen the point of their having print documents on bond.

Emlen had laughed, “Nothing personal is allowed on the island. But more than that, these documents are supposed to be impossible to forge... which they are, if you were to try it by computer.” Graham didn’t understand. Emlen had just passed him the

bond.

In front of the official, Graham quaked: printed, measured, scanned and quizzed. Graham froze when they asked him to write them a fresh text, freakishly wondering if he should have attempted something like Nicolas would write? Emlen hadn't prepped him for that. What the Hell would happen if he were found out?

Instead, he tried to write something so bad—so popular—that style was simply not discernible. The man, in his purple uniform, gave him an appraising look... and ticked him off the registry.

“Welcome to your Retreat, Mr Wright. Breakfast is at six. Sharp. We'll be expecting your work logs. Next!”

Finally, they were dumped into the secured area. The Retreat had done a lot to turn it into a classical villa, but the old barracks still showed through.

“Go and make friends,” said Emlen, before walking away.

Nanograph Seven

New York — Times Square – Two Years Ago

The vultures were circling her Writers. That fact was obvious when you watched the way she moved. Choinski used to be the “Killer,” that’s what the shadows had called her—though Markoff never had actually verified whether that was the truth. For his own part, his Agency had been built on the back of a wave of crime Writers from the early decades of the Millennium—and he’d learnt their lessons well. On taking out an old bootlegger, Markoff had been reliably informed that he fought in the style of the old KGB. Just before he had garroted the man saying it.

There was a kind of likeness between publishing and the old Cold War. Between publishing and the Mafia, in fact. Easy enough to find those kinds of connotations when the right kind of power and money was involved.

He watched as Choinski came through the rush of the public toward them. “Killer,” but now she practically limped. Markoff checked around the conference room, watching the others riffle through their pads—just as he was himself. How to approach this woman, in her armoured office wear? Push her too far, and perhaps she would strike back? He wasn’t immune to that himself—after all, he was one of those vultures... The truth was, Choinski was done. Her own Writers wanted to renegotiate, some right in the middle of their deals.

That’s why they had all agreed to meet here, and offer her a payout. No one wanted a war. No one wanted to get the bloody unions involved... so the Agents approached by her erstwhile Writers, would instead meet her here to bargain.

Markoff flashed back to the present, Choinski entered, closing the glass door of the private glass box they’d rented in the middle of Times Square. Open to view by all passers-by, but “neutral territory.”

“Speak. Whoever’s responsible for this debacle, talk now.” You had to admire her forthrightness. Though no one spoke. “I know what this is about, and as you all know, my negotiations are protected under the Voyce Agreement...”

Please. Markoff was embarrassed for her. “Please sit, Mzz Choinski, you know us all here.” Absurdly, he could see the other attendees nodding from the corner of his eye.

Didn't they realise that her angry speech was exactly the kind of weakness they could exploit? "There is no need for you to defend your rights."

She met his eyes, as one stares at a point while standing on one foot—so as not to fall over. Smoothed her suit; worn over Kevlar stockings... mad to come here looking for a fight. Or is she at the wild end of indignance?... Then the woman took her time to walk around the back of them to her seat.

Didn't we think it was clever placing her away from the door? Trapping her. As it turned out, it only meant she had the chance to survey the gathering.

"You want to pay me out?" she asked.

"That's not it... your Writers approached each of us... the five of us here represent more than eighty percent of your business..." Markoff found it suddenly awkward to say.

"And so you're here to do me a favour? What the Hell are we talking about? The Writers don't have any say in this!"

Finally, Curtis spoke, "Alright, Mzz Choinski, your ratings are shot. There's going to be scum oozing out of the cracks to make a name by poaching your Writers. The publishing business is already in upheaval. We only want to stop that."

"Ha! Of course you do. Just. Just give me a week," her voice steadied, "And if I can't turn it around, then you can have them all."

"Alright then, we really do not want trouble, yes?" Markoff thought that was for the best, what could she do but exhaust herself? Good.

They all nodded agreement. And sat. Waited. Until the Agents realised, that Choinski was going nowhere. So they each slunk away, leaving her alone.

Chapter Eight

Graham

Greece – Rhodes – Now

It turned out that Graham didn't have much in common with the Authors on Retreat. At the very beginning of each day, they would be given a feeder, at which they would doodle on over breakfast, and afterward each would go their own ways. They weren't interested in tarrying.

Graham watched the two men he had eaten with—each having only desultorily stroked their feeders and not spoken—watched them walk away. He chased the younger man, who'd appeared to be missing what should have been half a pound of ear-jewelry—*nothing personal comes on campus...*

“Hey! How do we? ... What do we do?” Nothing. Graham carried on, “I got told they're expecting work logs? Is it, did you get instructions from your patron?” The guy looked as if he'd been there a long time already—Graham figured there had been an outbreak of lice around a month ago, and the old guard still wore overgrowth from once-shaven heads. No mirrors in the camp so far, only the shiny, blank screen of his pad. Graham figured if it hadn't been for the stress he was under, he'd probably have had their same haggard expression. “My name's 'Adam.'”

“You just do your thing,” the haggard Writer said. Then walked free of him.

No one talked with anyone else. They were apart.

Until after dinner. Only when they were drunk did they come out—like a desperate homophilia between young, male friends.

Of course they complained about Editors. About missing their entourages. But also, their more obscure fears...

“I don't know whom I'm writing to!” the Writer punctuated that by a swipe of his flaming skewer of toasted marshmallow; balanced in the other hand by a quart of gin.

“Pah! Just infer one of the suckers.” The crowd laughed cruelly with “Haggard” from earlier, and at his jape—Graham had stalked him as much as he’d dared, but learnt nothing. Graham knew exactly why they were laughing at that, however, as all the imagination in writing had gone out of that Retreat.

“This am- this am-bi-guity,” said all-so-fucking-carefully by Haggard, “It’s driving me nuts! My own ambiguity is doing my head in. Now, what the Hell do I mean by that?” A sad-drunk patted his broad back, and Haggard was almost stabbed in the face by that helpful, fellow drunk’s toasted-marshmallow skewer.

Ah, fuck the lot of ‘em. Them and their piss... Graham had taken half a bottle of his own homemade gin, and felt nothing. Neither drunk, nor incensed. As far as he could see, this was golden. Being paid to write their stuff, without threat of it being altered. ... Or understood.

He felt left out of their pain.

“I wouldn’t have expected to find you here, Graham.” He turned around to find Nicolas there behind him. *Damn!* He had tried looking for Nicolas, but hadn’t felt able to ask around for him yet.

“Err,” he replied. It was Nicolas, but not as Graham remembered him from their past meetings. He stood there, still taller than Graham, though now he was hunched. Darker skin. Graham very probably would not have recognised him. If his life hadn’t actually depended upon it.

The pale blond haired man leant in close. “It’s ‘Nicolas Flemming.’” It was a stage-whispered reminder of his “betters.”

“Sure. We met at, ah...” he laid it on thick, “the AMOS conference.”

“No, not at all, in Darjeeling and then for D-MATCK.”

“Sure,” Graham slurred, as if slow of understanding.

Nicolas looked at him appraisingly. At the half-empty bottle in Graham’s hand. “Don’t drink the drugs. They’ll make you forget.” Graham laughed at that. “I’m serious.

The Agents spike the drink. Lets those poor buggers off-steam, but with no lasting cross-pollination of ideology.”

Jesus. The other man snorted softly, turning to walk away. Graham followed him into the darkness from the bonfire. Nicolas didn't seem to care.

Eventually, they sat, looking through wire, over on to the far Greek shore. Nicolas offered him a swig of his flask, “It's good. Stilled by a herbalist back there.” Graham took it, but sadly, knowing it would do nothing for him. “What are you here for?” asked Nicolas. Graham didn't know what to say. “Oh no, of course not. Don't answer that,” Nicolas rolled his eyes. “But, I wouldn't have thought to see you here...” he said it once again, as he had by the bonfire, and scowled. “Now you're here, though, what about your life behind you? And that filly you were working at D-MATCK with? Claire, was it?”

Graham was surprised at the man for remembering her name, he wouldn't have. He felt himself flush. “She's not around anymore.”

“No, I guess you wouldn't be here if she was, would you?” He left that hanging as he took a swig of his own drink.

“And yourself?”

“Me? I'm doing work for an antiquarian in Maine.” That's what Emlen had said his claim was, and Nicolas hadn't disappointed him with anything else. “I've done a few of these Retreats now. Old hat, you know? I'd say it was like my second home—as if I actually had another. Proud of being able to pick out the real stayers. It's not for everybody, you have to have a certain... kind of past.” Graham had never felt more like an old spy than right then. Was he supposed to reveal something of his own? A password?

They sat for a while, until Graham felt he had to say, “Yeah.” But until Nicolas had hauled himself to his feet, perhaps fifteen minutes later, nothing else was said.

“I'm sure I'll be seeing you tomorrow, won't I?” He didn't wait for Graham to answer, not before he had stepped away over the coarse ground.

“Fuck,” said Graham, recounting it to Emlen later still. “He was always a superior prick.”

“Forget your grudges! You can’t come across that way to him.”

“How else is it going to be? None of those guys ever took me seriously! They always thought I rode into academia on my looks and diction.”

“Oh, hell then, Graham, pout like you are now and tell him you’re writing a biography on *Word Play* for an unrepentant fan! Better yet, insinuate your ‘patron’ is ashamed of it. Who knows, maybe he’d never want his love of you getting public? Perfect.”

Graham’s jaw clamped like tetanus.

Emlen smiled, “Yes, do that. Nicolas will believe you’re being used.”

“Let me drink, or give me something, Emlen!” They lurked by the heat shield of the concrete toilet block. Graham had seen the purple livery of the Retreat patrolling as he’d gone over, but Emlen seemed at ease. “Please.”

“Think of it as a job, Graham. You’ll do well.” He patted his shoulder.

The Writers slept in one of five barracks, and it was after lights out when Graham slipped into his bunk in “Four-E.” He couldn’t sleep in the bond-like sheets; flat cotton that had actually folded and creased as if a bound.

Fearful of this gulag—at least now he felt justified in that—sober and angry. Before it had been too abstract, Emlen working behind the scenes to smuggle them through airports and into new countries. But concrete and shame made sense. *OMFG—Now I’m developing a taste for machine guns and explosions.* At least it made more sense than the alternative. Finally, he fell asleep to a lullaby of watch turret checks and callbacks.

Of course, Nicolas did see him the next morning; Graham was waiting on him outside

the “One-D” mess hall.

“Oh, Graham... well I imagine the Agents won’t really mind if it’s *you* I’m ‘fraternising’ with. Very well then.” They took their stamped metal plates, and stood in line for the “creator optimised” breakfast food.

Graham gave his best-prepared opening. “I’ve just been at a bit of a loose end here these past few days, it was a surprise to see you last night.” He followed as Nicolas took his serving of curd—blue-blackly enriched with antioxidants—setting down by a wooden, slatted table. “Trying to wrap my head around the job, you know?” Nicolas grunted around his breakfast. “It’s been a long time since anyone bothered to ask about the Series.”

The man almost swallowed his spoon. “*Word Play?*” Then shook his head. “Now-now, Graham, I shouldn’t have to tell you that you don’t talk about your project with the other Writers.” But he was only chiding him.

Graham felt ridiculous—but still blushed involuntarily. Emlen would have been proud at that touch of realism.

“Of course, I’m sorry.” Though Nicolas only waved the apology away, looking at the stationary Agents, dressed in their purples, arrayed round the mess. Graham noticed there were more of them there, stationed in barracks number One—

“You don’t really understand the agreement, here, do you Graham? It isn’t really about the writing, or about exclusivity—whatever it was they told you. It’s all about the readers. And who knows what it is *they* really want?” He shook his head. “Maybe I’m not so surprised to see you here, after all... coming to this Retreat, being patronised the way we are, it’s practically the last stop, along the desperate way of being washed-up—washed clean.” And there he left a pause, so pregnant, it would practically have to be freed by Caesarian section. “Down to a readership of only one...”

“And the scholarly archive,” added Graham.

Nicolas gave him a lasting glance. “Of course. And that.”

They finished breakfast in silence, while Graham tried to think of something more

to say. But by the time Nicolas told him firmly that he was leaving him to write now, he hadn't managed to think of anything more.

As he returned to his own Four-E, Graham was stopped by one of the Agents, and handed the daily pad. "Thank you," he said absently. It hadn't exactly been a productive experience so far for Graham, but then, Emlen had reminded him the night before he must still be practicing in Nicolas' style. It was a "job" after all.

He took the pad to the same rocky outlook he'd shared with Nicolas the night before. Settling himself, stroking it awake, he was surprised to see a msg already scribed upon it: "Sign, and replace the card concealed by the battery in the back." *All right?* The chassis clicked free, and Graham took the pencil that was standard issue stylus at the retreat, signing his name on the card, then replaced it.

Immediately the screen wrote in Emlen's hand.

"Excellent. You're on a black-pad now, meshed with mine, and signed with your signature on the circuit board. We're free to write now. You'll have to remember to remove the card by the end of the day. I will remind you."

Graham took that distrust for granted. "I've tried speaking to Nicolas, he sounds desperate."

"Of course he is. It's bad enough for any Writer to devalue themselves like this, by the Retreat's exclusivity, but from my own reports, his Ransom is getting impatient. It's going to happen soon, be ready."

"And he's sad. He thinks he only has one reader left." *His Ransom*. He sat under the diluted sun. "I don't know what I have to do."

"Neither do I. Be ready. Write!" Emlen's msg disappeared, back to the blank page of the feeder.

"What am I supposed to write?" he asked the grass. Though at least this was a familiar, and understandable fear.

“Swallow it,” came the command on his screen, and Graham obediently removed the bond card from the back of his pad, chewed, and swallowed the pulp. Shortly after that, the normal bell had sounded, calling the Writers around camp to return their feeders for checking and logging to the dataroom. Graham knew datarooms well, the virtual meeting places where all information shared between partners could be read but never removed. Duly diligent. The Retreat took it further, however, their system wasn't even on a darknet, but orphaned from the world net entirely.

He tensed while the same Agent from that morning took his pad, plugged both ends into the intake and pulled the wonderfully archaic switch. Graham imagined the intense electronic pressure that pushed through the pad's memory, reading and erasing it completely, as if an old hypodermic expelling tranquilliser.

“Clean,” said the Agent. Then Graham had to move on, taking with him the chit that would pay for his dinner.

“Wake.” Graham came to immediately. To the pain in his sternum from Emlen's knuckles, with the man himself straddled over his bed. Graham flashed to pinprick clarity.

“Ah!” Graham jerked upright, and Emlen fell off his bed, yet still managed to pull Graham up with him.

“Get awake. It's happening now.” Emlen begun to move away. But Graham grabbed at him.

“What the fuck, Emlen? Who the hell do you think you—” He suddenly stopped shouting, the two of them standing between bunks. “What's up with the other guys?” The other Writers were not disturbed.

“The same thing that happens to them every night, you fool. Drugged to sleep. That isn't important. I know that Nicolas is out of the compound, but it wasn't supposed to happen this way. The arrangement must have been changed. Damn it. He has help now, my contact luckily found the Agent who'd been attacked before anyone else did,

he came to me and hid the body himself. Though it means we don't have time, and I need you to go after him alone while I stop the other—probably his Editor.” He'd said that so coldly.

“Jesus.” Graham stopped. “Alone? How do I even know where he's gone?”

“Not to worry about that. I've sprayed him with a call number, and out on the island, the transmission should be clear. You'll have to stop him before he makes the exchange—stop him at any cost. We can't let that bound get free. Stop him, get the bound, switch it with the one I've prepared; before you do the Ransom yourself.”

It was all so quick. The two men left the barracks, out under a thankfully clear night sky. “Oh, is that all?” *Ha!* “Couldn't we have just alerted the Agents before now?”

Emlen laughed, “Sure, if you wanted Nicolas dead. But no, that isn't all.” He paused, bringing his satchel around to his front. “That isn't why I had you practicing his style. You have to take this new bound to the Ransom instead, trick them into taking it. They'll want to check your style against his, to prove they have the right Writer, so I do hope you've been diligent.” Emlen tried to hand him the new, bare bound.

“Hold on, what will they do if I don't match his style?”

“I really don't know, Graham. Though the likelihood is they'll just cut and run. Leaving the least amount of evidence they can.”

“And my eyewitness account?”

“Don't worry about that, it's irrelevant.” So comforting. But he did take the bound from his hands.

“This is another of your optimised bounds?”

“Yes, if all else fails, if we can't capture them here and now, I may be able to track the scholarship contained within it. However, I have faith you'll get us Nicolas' work, and so take us straight to the culprit.”

It was easy to see where Nicolas had escaped the compound; he'd merely cut his way through the perimeter fence. “Crude,” said Emlen, though Graham knew that the

same would have been said about himself—the only thing Graham actually had over Nicolas was his relative youth. Emlen handed him a tracking pad.

“Here. Stop him, swap the bounds and get to the drop point. You remember where I said it was going to be? Hopefully the site won’t have changed. You’re the only person who can do this, Graham, so I need you to do this right. We need you to do this. Remember that this is the man who stole your book!” *Wait, was it?* “We can get it back.” Well, maybe they could?

“Fuck. As if I’ve got a choice,” said Graham. Then slipped through the fence. Looking back, he saw Emlen salute him incongruously, then disappear back into the camp. Graham was alone. Holding the pad low in his sight, he began to trot across the dark ground.

Why was he chasing this man? It was a fool’s errand. *But, he thought, I never want to end up like him, sad and alone out here, writing just for one...*

Over the crest of a hill, Graham saw the silhouette of a figure running. It had to be Nicolas.

“Stop! Stop, I can’t let you do this!” Graham was already exhausted, having run pell-mell over the rocky island.

The figure stopped its own momentum, turned semi-profile and waited warily.

“Graham? Really? You’re stopping me? I expected you were here for the same thing.” Graham gave him a searching look, identifying the rucksack over his shoulder. Nicolas smiled tightly. “I know it isn’t ideal... but I do need the money.”

He thinks I’m trying to stop him making an ethical mistake!

“But...” Nicolas said, looking ruined, the way his shoulders had dropped as he’d explained his predicament—how galling it must have been to tell Graham that.

Graham approached the older, with his arms open as if to beseech. Graham said, “Maybe we can sort something out, find you another House—” and then lunged!

“What are you—” then Graham had Nicolas over backward, down on the ground, thumping the breath from his body. Nicolas’ eyes bulged at the indigestible pain, but still struggled against the weight above him. It was only then that Graham realised he was on his knees, both hands busy holding Nicolas down. And that he could see the other man was collecting himself to scream.

Fuck. He brought his skull down on Nicolas’ nose.

Rising, he saw the shock on Nicolas’ face before being sprayed by a gust of the man’s blood. “Aww, fuck, Nic!” Dropped his head against him again, and felt the man stop struggling.

Graham pulled himself free, to stop and sit by the side of the body.

He tried to catch his breath. “What am I doing?”

But he knew what it was, so he looked through Nicolas’ backpack and found the single copy of his new bound. Graham swapped that for Emlen’s own, and then decided it was best to get going and to drop the bag with the real work elsewhere. He would pick it up later. He owed Nicolas that much, not to lose his work.

Then he stopped, fearful. Looking back properly, for the first time, at Nicolas lying there. He stooped, he knelt. Nicolas’ face was dark and sticky and as Graham watched, the puddle where his lips met, rose... bubbled. Pop! Frothed and then drained. Frothed once again.

“Thank fuck, you stupid bastard. Don’t you get it? I’m trying save you. Just—stay where you are.” But figured the unconscious man wouldn’t actually think to comply. “Perfect.”

He stood again and looked around the landscape blankly. What must he do now? Then he saw the pad he’d dropped when he attacked Nicolas. It had a map of the area, it showed his position and he had an idea where Nicolas should have been heading—a secluded hollow. All right, time to go and meet this, *I don’t know*, “double-Agent?” He laughed, one hand on the pad, the other on the trick bound and he got moving.

Dropping his bag with Nic’s bound and the pad together before the hollow,

Graham topped the hill. Looking around, it wasn't long until he saw the man who must have been waiting on Nicolas. Standing in the middle of a bare open space. He was a tall Asian man wearing blue.

Graham slowed as he approached the man.

The figure spoke crisply, "Ah, we've been waiting for you." *We?*

"Sure." What did he really expect? It had to be hardcore. "Alright. So how do we do this?" Graham suddenly felt self-conscious, covered with the dried blood which must have still been on his face.

"Well, it's really not what you think it is, but I do trust you have the bound?" Oh shit, Graham felt his gizzards twisting.

Then it got worse. "Wait! Wait," it came from far behind him, in a loud sob. The man looked across, while Graham turned, back to where he had come from and saw Nicolas arrive over the hill.

Graham started. He jerked. But couldn't decide where to bolt. Looking back wildly toward the man in blue, Graham could appreciate that he had the same brief look of shock.

Nicolas covered the ground at incredible speed. "FUCK YOU GRAHAM, you useless fucking retard! I'm Flemming, I'm the one you've been waiting for. It's me, not this—argh, get the shit away—" Reaching the two of them, Nicolas pushed against him, but still held onto Graham's arm tightly, pushing and pulling as if claiming the prize in a tug of war. "This isn't who you've come to meet." Nicolas grinned through the crust of blood that cracked round his lips. He panted, "This idiot attacked me while I was coming over. I don't know what he's told you, but he isn't the man you've come to meet."

Oh shit...

Then the Asian man answered, "Well, neither are we." He gestured and suddenly there was white light and noise around them, now Graham knew there had to be 'copters above.

“What the hell is this?” Nicolas demanded uselessly. Both of them knew who it had to be. Hadn’t they both been waiting to be caught?

The stranger watched Graham—now lit—instead of Nicolas. “My name is Justin Fortesque. We’ve been after you, Graham.” He wanted to run. How did they know he was there, and would be with Nicolas? Weren’t they after the other Writer after all? *I’ve got to run!* But as he felt the decision to move, black clad, masked figures fell from the lit sky. Well-armed men.

“You’ve been working with Emlen, tell us where he is,” Justin said. The words cut through the noise of the air chopped by the blades above. Now rifle-wielding soldiers bracketed the three of them.

“You’re here for him?! For Graham—**FUCKING**—Nutt? That isn’t possible.” Nicolas attempted to surge forward, but was held by two parenthetical soldiers.

“Oh, of course, Mr Flemming. Your book is still secure I take it?” Justin looked around at the fray. “Well, of course. At least that’s managed. Officer.”

The black figure to Justin’s left lifted the rifle and squeezed on the trigger. Nothing else moved.

Nothing changed. *I don’t get it?* Graham looked around to figure it out.

He looked to the officer, to Justin, to Nicolas. *What?*

Beside him, he saw that Nicolas’ face was gone. Then the body fell.

The tall man in blue carried on, “Graham, listen to me, we need to get to Emlen.”

“What the fuck. What the fuck! What the **FUCK**?” Graham shook and twisted in the grip of the officers at either side of him.

Near hysterical, it took Graham longer than it should have to see the scarlet phosphor of the word “down,” as it repeated over and again on Justin’s chest. *Laser show? Well alright*, he thought.

As he dropped to the ground, falling limply between the guards, he thought he heard the soft “thirrps” of failed whistles. As he did, the troops around him suddenly

scattered, and from his inferior vantage point, they vanished.

“Dammit!” he heard Justin yell, but that seemed premature, as only moments after that—the explosions began above them.

Graham wanted nothing other than to stay put, holding his hands above his head and wait for the burning shrapnel to stop falling. Instead, he felt a freezing hand wrap around the joint of his shoulder, tearing him up and onto his feet. But there was no one there. No one holding him. Though he was still being pulled away.

The debris did not fall on top of his head—instead, the ‘copters which had been above the party had bounced away to the sides of the valley. *Like those seals*, he thought, flashing to a Metatext show he’d once seen, *Batted through the air between giant Killer Whales*. It was just a game for those whales; for those men who must have hit the ‘copters with rockets. He had to run, the frozen hand had him on his feet, stumbling away between the wreckage.

“Come. Come,” said the hand. And as Graham watched, the heat waves and the light from the crashed ‘copters seemed to condense on top of the twisting air that led him away.

Within feet, he could see the fire in front of him resolve into a frost outline. Graham and the invisible man kept running, over the nearest hilltop. As they reached the top, the snowman ahead of him split, sloughed and—of course—revealed Emlen. Graham shivered in sympathy, the way the other man’s skin was a pale blue-white.

Still, he grinned at Graham. “Never thought being soaked in chilled meta-materials could be quite so comforting.” Graham tried to recoil as Emlen took a hold of him; hugged and patted at Graham with his pale, cold hands. “Stop struggling! You’re on fire.” Graham suddenly realised then that he was! He froze, as Emlen’s chilled hands doused him.

He looked Graham over. “Are you able to move? We must run.”

Graham couldn’t concentrate. Nicolas. Emlen— “You were invisible.”

“Yes, I was. Now I wish I hadn’t had to play that trump so soon, this island has

become a real deathtrap.”

In the light of the fallen ‘copters, Graham could see that he meant exactly that.

Emlen didn’t wait any longer and began running off. *Oh my God*, thought Graham, and followed him away.

Nanograph Eight

Undisclosed Location – One-Year Ago

As Rupert brought the gavel down—hard—one last time, he twitched his gaze over to the tall, gray man in flashing goggles, who stood to the back of the room taking statistics. It was a guilty look. The man should never have been allowed into the auction at all, but the auctioneer—Rupert himself—had sworn for him. Had signaled to his clients that he was to be trusted.

It's much too late now. Whatever it is he wants. So he turned to the next item.

“A Ransom, ladies and gentlemen—only lately of the Writer himself. So rare, in fact, you might have noticed it doesn't even have a title on our catalogue.” There were appreciable murmurs. “Only a description, pencil markings on the third most front page, ‘Bound Zero,’ is included. Of course, the text's original patron is undisclosed, and how it came from illegal Ransom to this auction: unknown.” Well, thought Rupert, “unknown” to these bidders, but thank you to Cachet!

The crowd of some eight bibliophiles—Rupert took a huff from his almond-scented, anti-fungal kerchief; primarily in distaste, as these men were simply too rarified to have fallen to true infection—each shuffled their collective chairs closer to the dais. This was unprecedented. A Ransomed bound was rare enough, but once done, gone forever. To bring such a bound back into circulation? That was something else again; to have a secret book! What could you do with one no one was willing to claim as their own?

They didn't even ask to know what the text was actually about. In fact, wasn't that the thrill of it?

The bids were about to begin, and he impetuously cracked the gavel down hard again, to catch their attention to the order at hand. They all looked to the centre, at him, while Rupert himself looked around the bare room. They had already found one bomb before anyone had arrived—not such an unusual find, given the net worth of the men who came to these auctions. That was why they moved the site each time. What he couldn't discount, however, was that it was somehow related to the “statistician” who had bullied his way in.

“Opening bids from one hundred.” Thousand. Not that it would go begging like that!

But who will buy it, Rupert thought. Would it be the ex-spy, McDougall? Or the idiot drug baron? Or the unnamed, but eternally preening, so-famous Writer slumming it amongst them, still tragically looking for her—for any—(and especially lower-case) inspiration? They’re going to fight for it! And they did. The bidders almost literally threw their paddles into the air for attention. What are they hoping to do with it?

No matter.

The stranger sat in his corner, taking notes—almost—no! As if like a Librarian...

Of course, the man already had so much dirt on Rupert, and on many of these clients, that if he had wanted to make a problem of himself, he would have. Rupert was used to being blackmailed—which is what made him such a wonderful fence—that is, “auctioneer”—but he’d be glad when this was over. Once this item was gone, it should disappear for good...

Chapter Nine

Christy

London – Southwark – One-Year Ago

The note read: “Christy was a big girl; her hips broader than her breasts—possessed, but un-certain, of her own self-assurance. I do not think she thought much of me.”

The woman’s text was right, Christy did find the fifty-eight year old Writer sitting in front of her to be... “ill-genuine,” as she would probably have quipped of herself, in highly affected English. The “Dame”—actually, literally the last of the royal Dames—had been the first of those to call Writers suffering cultural exhaustion as “ruined, only capable of telling lies.” Not the truth, as only a make believe artist could’ve said it: lies.

It was my worst idea to come here, to give the buggers a pen and ask them, “What’ve you got to tell me?” AA was both government project and support group. The Writers who came weekly would bring their manuscripts for review and work-shopping, texts then taken away by their social workers and entered into the “Authors Anonymous Project.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t have been so tough on those poor “Writers,” after all, they knew no one would ever read their books again. While it might have been their own fault—unable or unwilling to support the Metatext of their works—it was commonly understood the project was just a home for orphaned books. Who would bother reading them? “Writer” wasn’t right, so it was “Author”—trapped by their singular vision. But then after the meeting proper, she saw the true depths of it.

Authors huffing on electronic inhalers—*Inspiration*, cheaply government subsidised; a methadone for those lost to text. She winced away from the pale, plastic tubes of it, lit LED one end to show it was live, and the other stuffed up their noses. They’d gone for real coffee afterward, and like kids, they had chosen the worst of dives. As they passed the *Inspiration* round, with the swatch bound of bond and print that followed, they had stroked and read. Blissed. *Inspired*—at last! And Christy feared that addiction more than anything. She had come close to it in the past, and her bosses had insisted on anti-fungal implants to protect her from the worst. But no one knew if that

was enough.

Christy had gestured past the Dame. “Aren’t you interested in the *Inspiration*? Or, are you scared of it? ...”

She had scoffed back. “Not at all. It’s debatable as to whether the urge comes from ourselves, or from that drug, but I’m fine without it.” The Dame had looked a question at her.

Christy nodded. Of course. Christy loved books. Had grown to love the bounds of text. But she’d always best been a facilitator, watching over Writers from their shoulders, Christy knew how deep that abyss went, but had never felt it herself.

I suppose they write lies, because it’s all they can tell themselves.

The AA had originally come from the crisis in literature. What to do with the textual dinosaurs? Surely we couldn’t merely retire them so early; not so easily? Some thought they’d go into politics, writing great speeches: but then what politics did they have but totalitarianism? Indeed, there was talk they should have then been sent covertly into dictatorship states, as a kind of attack force. But no one was really serious about that. Instead, there was the National Writing Initiative, which had fed in to the AA Project. Apparently, in the Depression of the nineteen-twenties, the US had instigated their own Federal Writer’s Project, a work for the dole to keep their Writers alive. However, it was cultural money for pragmatics. The Writers were encouraged to maintain a crisp style, descriptive and significantly different from the predominant, sentimental rhetoric of localised colour writing. The new crisis in English literature had taken another tack; a kind of digital conservation, those Writers, these Authors, were to travel the nation and set down the idiosyncratic prose of England. To write it, in only their own words. Pensioned-off.

The problem was Christy and the Collective had to recyc their whole haul from the warehouse. The bounds had been rejected by every fence, by every scholar worth their book-bought salt. Neither Christy nor Shades could even bring themselves to tell the rest of the group about the aborted heist. Simply put: Clinton had been right. Those bounds had been too gray market to be worth anything. And it was only made worse when Lisa had suffered her stroke. What *both* Christy and Shades had thought a perforated

eardrum, turned into a clot that had shot through her brain. She was mostly all right now. But it had set Shades and Christy at odds.

“Dammit! We need professional help here. We just don’t know enough to stay ahead of the law,” Christy had told the Collective meeting. As far as the PLC went, they were still just skirting the status quo. Just enough to get noticed. Not enough to be dangerous. “None of us have been trained in this kind of work. We need someone to show us the way. Now, there are specialists...” *Shit, don’t overplay that hand, girl!* “But we can’t afford them.”

“Then what are you suggesting we try now, Christy? Should we try kidnapping?” She hadn’t known whether Shades was actually serious about that—being as she was more foolhardy than Christy.

She had ignored Shade’s sneer. “No, we need someone willing to work with us. Someone from the field, but messed-up in the head.”

That’s why she’d come to the AA meeting, carrying a box of fine pens; like Cuban cigars. She’d gone in, and they’d figured she was different from the start. It was why Christy had pegged the Dame, she hadn’t taken any of the pens; not tried their balance on her outstretched finger, as one would a throwing dagger.

“Don’t think we don’t recognise your type here, Mzz. And don’t kid yourself you can still recruit us. We’re finished.” But she took the pen offered to her after the official meeting, and wrote. Insulted her. Much better than the others, who had taken the pens and returned to writing their epics. Feverishly, waiting for the precious pens to be snatched from their fingers. Christy would have asked for the pens back, but they would have to be a loss. As much as they were anonymous, they still took any opportunity to write, and hoped that their work would manage to survive the ages.

“That’s not what I want from any of you. I don’t work with the Houses. Not anymore.” The Dame raised her plucked brow. “I’m involved in a project, we deal with bounds, and we’re looking for talent.” The Collective knew a lot about bounds—and she herself knew a lot about the systems of sourcing material—what they didn’t understand, was the work *within* books in the way that a true insider did. Christy knew that what they really needed was a Librarian, but a hopeless Author would do well enough.

“Then you should come out on the road with me. I’m writing about modern

alliterates in East Anglia. It's a farce," said with such a straight face. "I am very talented, Christy. However, I wonder what it is you're looking for?"

"Really? We're looking for a plot. Our... organisation... has to learn to see the bigger picture. It's something 'novelists' are good at."

"'Novelists'? Don't think I didn't hear your slur! To you, we're just addicts, aren't we?"

Christy dodged that. "I do respect your kind, but I've learnt it's best to handle you very carefully. I'm not—and I've never been—an Editor."

"You won't dive into the abyss as they would? All right, I don't actually understand it, but you're the one taking the risk. I'm only performing my function. You know we," she waved her hands at the men and women around them, "have special dispensation? Like old bounds, we can say whatever it is we want. No one's going to read it!" she laughed, slipping from her peculiar cadence, into real mirth.

Christy took her up on the offer. She slipped free of the Centre for a day, to head-off with the Dame. The government had given the Author a small car—in lieu of a land title—and so, burning hydrogen, they motored off east.

The Dame had a strange way of writing from life. Instead of hanging the address tag of a real person from her text, and inviting them in to it—which just wasn't practical for her work—she'd tried to recreate them instead! That's why she said she had to travel, and to "Live in the real world, not on a pad." Christy knew that Authors were a bit screwed up, but that seemed like an awful lot of needless work to her.

"I have things to say, that I'm arrogant enough to believe others will want to read." Neither of them had admitted to the evident failure of that. "Wiki Writership just isn't the same, seeding and facilitating texts."

"Couldn't you have just made a try of it? It could have saved your career."

"Perhaps it could have. However, did I not just say I was arrogant? That used to be the prerequisite of being a true Author." She obviously reveled in the old-time word.

"No, the early pension came around, and I took it." The Dame appeared to love punctuating her statements—and likely, would eventually end her own life and career—with sharply decisive turns of the car. From whatever main road they'd been on, they then hit the country laneways.

They stopped at a roadside pub, run dilapidated to the very limits of its heritage listing. The Dame condescended to have Christy buy her a drink—*I would've expected it to be a sherry, but she wants a spritz? Got it.* As they sat in a corner booth, they both took out their feeders. Christy checked her feeds, and the other woman took notes. It didn't seem particularly interesting to Christy, until she realised the Dame was taking notes regarding fellow travellers.

“You won't just tag them? It's impolite, but incredibly simpler.”

“You've never Authored a book, have you?” she asked Christy.

“Well, I have helped write plenty, I've tried to be involved in one or two a month since school. And of course, I helped manage my sources.”

“Not that. I mean, you've never 'Authored' a bound, never made something from scratch, that your readers would only have to believe—and not have to authorise for themselves?”

“It doesn't work that way in the Metatext,” she shook her head. “If it did, then why would anyone...” Would that be a tender point? *Why would anyone read, if the text didn't invite them in?*

“I do not 'shape life narratives into story,' as my department head once, so quaintly, put it. I have no metrics, and no quality assurance of story. I write as I see fit. I told you, we've been given that odd, and special dispensation.”

“And likely why you're only paid on sufferance.” They both laughed at that.

“Probably.” She stopped her notes. “We're out of the city now, so why don't you tell me about your project?” Christy hesitated. “Oh, if anyone cared about what I said, I wouldn't be out here, would I?” *True.*

“Municipal libraries.” It still sounded absurd to her. “My group collects bounds, and we plan on lending them to the public.”

The Dame laughed again, “Really? How successful are you so far?”

Christy blushed. “Not very. I've been trying to lead them in the right direction, but—”

“Do they know your background?”

“Mm, no.” The Dame nodded her on from that guilt. “Well, it's become more difficult than that. Even I only know the business side of the industry. And all of us,

from radicals to binding fetishists, we only know dynamic books. The Metatext hides so many of our sins—as it reveals everything else. Bounds are something else again. Print reveals relationships too well. We’ve already had to dump a whole lot of bounds recently, because each revealed its relationship to the rest. I’d never even thought of that! One book exists equally alongside every other on the ‘text. I’m trying to figure out how to make this library work, and I can’t.”

The Dame sat back. “I’m trying to understand why you’re a part of this. Of course you’re right, this isn’t your role.”

“I just love books. I can’t go back to my old job—I wouldn’t if I could. This opportunity came along, and I took it.” *Nothing else.*

“Girl,” she leveled at her, “what you need is a Librarian. Not me. They’re the information brokers, only they will understand what it is you’re trying to do.”

“You think I don’t know that? But that’s impossible.” It had come to that.

The Dame shook her head, thoughtfully. “You need something more miserable than I. Oh! Don’t I have just the thing for you, though? You’ll be so thankful.”

The Dame revealed enabling the collectors.

“Graham hated that he had to come to us. The one thing he always wanted was to be taken seriously; while in this day and age, we are the worst of all the selfish Authors. ‘Writing for ourselves,’ how absurd. Isn’t that right, Christy?”

“You know I’ve always wanted to share stories, and books.” Conciliatory, though she understood the precarious edge of their collection, how her motives tussled. Like the warring desires amongst her co-conspirators.

“Well the poor boy found himself with some early fame, in one of the first Writer serials. They never last long, and he went solo after that. There was quite some success then, but a kerfuffle toppled his star; I understand that since, he’s been re-writing that first big book, at each edition making it closer and closer to his ‘true version’ of it. To prove himself, I dare say. Admirable, but rather doomed. We all must revisit our themes, but it’s foolish to re-write the same thing, you’ll only end up warring with yourself.”

“Which I figure is what’s happened now?”

“Perhaps I’ll just let you meet him?”

So they had gone to find him in one of his common haunts, the “Pen and the Sword.” *Christ! He’s a poetic*, thought Christy. They were the worst.

It was a theme bar for Hemmingways, and of course he was there, drinking himself stupid. *Just give it up and go get some Inspiration, this is pathetic.*

“Graham,” the Dame had introduced herself, saying nothing of Christy beside her.

“Judy.” He looked up, and while he didn’t seem to notice Christy at all, she was close enough to see the struggle of a clever man beneath the drunk. “You’d like a drink?” *Perhaps we can just take one of yours’?* But Christy held her tongue. He had the ruins of six mojitos before him, *Oh, how the manner of what is manly has changed—after all, it had been the Hemmingway’s drink of choice.*

The Dame twirled her drink, “We’re fine.” She sat, and Christy followed beside her. “I heard you’ve been sent on an indefinite sabbatical?”

“Jesus-Fuck— yes.” He stopped himself. “Was mutual.” And he drank his punctuation.

“Have you had any response to your bounty? Graham has offered his embargo fee to whoever found him a copy of his erstwhile ‘bound.’ Didn’t you darling?”

“Made me halve it, couldn’t keep the escrow.” *Of course. From what I’ve read, the market hasn’t been kind to your valuation.* Christy still had her sources, after all.

“The remix of the book has done well for its new Writer, though,” continued Judy. It appeared, as Graham tried to focus on Christy, that she was a good deal more distant from him than was the Dame “Judy.” He had to squint.

“Who is?” Shook his head. “No. Wouldn’t know, Jude. Haven’t logged on.” He waved at the bartender.

“Why are we here, Judy? He’s a waster.”

“You are here, girl, because as much as he’s turned himself into a one-note joke, he is exactly the type that your punch line requires. Graham has spent the past twenty years researching exactly how information travels through your Metatext, and now he’s out in the cold. Liable to defect. Surely you can appreciate that?”

He looked back, as if he’d recognised his name, “What’d you want, Jude?”

“I just wanted to say hello, darling. It’s been a while since you visited the group.”

“Nothing to read. Read to you,” he said. As if he was angry at her.

“Are you ever sober?” Christy asked him.

He shouted his answer across the room at her. Of course she was closer than that. “If I wasn’t. If I was always drunk. Would I have to try so hard now?” Around the bar, a group of Writers laughed at that.

As they toasted him, the two women picked themselves up and left. The Dame told her, “Don’t be fooled, Christy, Graham used to be brilliant—or, rather, he could have been long ago. That’s why he’s your man, there’s none more ambitious than those once promising... Though his desperation is new. Still, I think he’s your best—and only—bet.”

“He’s too hot. We can’t take him on,” Shades was adamant afterward.

“But he’s exactly what we need.” Samanya tried to motion Christy away from his angry sister, while Christy tried to argue her case. He’d been acting as their go between, more so since Lisa’s accident. “Why don’t you vet him then?” When Christy had said she’d been out, working her own schemes again, it looked as if it might’ve turned to blows.

“That could be a good idea, Jada.” Diplomatic Sam. “Both of you work so well together, if you met him, and you agreed with Christy’s assessment, nothing could go wrong.” He still didn’t really understand what had happened between them. He hadn’t been told. But both he and Christy knew they needed more help than they had—and Graham Nutt was perfect for it.

Still, Christy thought he had found the perfect compromise. Jada really would have to see how perfect the Writer was—one way or the other. Even better, if Jada was his handler, then whatever his background, Christy could stay safe from it. It should suit everyone best.

Christy tried to appear as sincere as she could, “Jada, all you have to do is offer him a chance to get back his own bound. All he really wants is that validation. I know he’s been making a lot of noise, but he’s reached such a fever pitch that no one’s listening to a word he says, or that he Writes. He’s absolutely harmless. And that’s exactly what we want them to think of us.”

Samanya grinned at Christy—he could share that with her without giving away the

game, because he had literally stood himself between the two women.

He turned back to his sister, “Give it a go, alright?”

“I’ll meet him.” Jada had paused, and then she had nodded.

After she left the two of them, Christy had laughed with Sam. It was easier that way. “She’ll love him. I’ve been following Graham for almost a month,” Samanya glowered at that, but she never stopped, “He’s a whore. Graham’s jumped from one girl to the next, been trading, or borrowing on his own notoriety for months. An academic who wants to be the last word on the subject? He’s ‘dangerous.’”

Samanya snorted, “Is he any good?”

She blushed. “Ask your sister later, Sam, but I’m not interested in the guy. He could be useful, but I really don’t know what it is he wants.”

After the debacle at the depot, Christy had to deal a lot more closely with Sam, just so he could keep the delicate peace between her and Shades. He certainly hadn’t minded that at all. But she’d realised how alien he was to her. Sam didn’t seem to want what she did. Still there they were, together.

They arranged for Shades to follow Graham’s calendar over a number of days, familiarising herself with his movements, with his manners. She would pick her own time to approach him—if indeed she would. It wasn’t long, however, before Shades notified them to gather at one of their safehouses to meet him.

“I picked him up at a show. He was there for a woman.” Samanya raised his brows at that, but said nothing. Graham grinned at the response. “He wants to be involved.” They had agreed to bring him to their old printer’s ‘bathroom’ as they called it. They would show him the spray-tiled wet room, and not tip their hand by taking him straight to the newly built tenement vault.

“So this is your ‘Collective?’” Christy barely held back her snort, so that’s what Shades had gone with? After a long “discussion” at the AGM—she had gone with Lisa’s suggestion. Now it was real, and that was how they were recruiting. Graham approached the tubs that held the last of their vac-packed bounds. He didn’t appear impressed, *Well of course not, why do you think we need you, these are just the last—the least—of the bounds we could risk keeping.* “These things are from private Libraries?”

Christy stepped forward. “Most of this stuff,” she gestured at the bounds lumped

on the tables, “Are just common texts—recyc’d bounds from airport Espresso machines and other throw-away, in-situ texts. They’re just for the grassroots libraries. Pulpis pirate from their copywrit—now illegal copies, having out-stayed their thirty day lifespans.” She wanted to hit him—he didn’t recognise her from their earlier meeting at all, and he wanted to be observant now? But before she could say anything else, Samanya took her shoulder, firmly—fingers almost erotic—and led her away. *Yeah, better let Jada play with him.*

Graham looked after her briefly, and then went toward the bounds in the tubs. The speed he went through them, Christy knew what it was he was after, and how quickly he discarded anything else at all.

“We want a lot more than this, Graham.” Shades was back in charge. “We need you to design a system for us.”

“I don’t understand what you need? For these? Surely you could get away with these bounds? Hell, you could probably just set up a second hand store.” *Such a limited mind.* “Have you thought about targeting distributors, they must be—”

“Before we do that kind of thing, Graham,” Shades glanced at Christy, “Surely we’d have to develop a ‘catalogue’ system?” She had listened to Christy for that at least. “We wouldn’t have much of a collection if no one knew it was available. But it has to be camouflaged as well, no one can be allowed to track it back to us, or to link any bound to any other in the collection. None of us have your expertise, that’s why we’ve come to you.”

Graham looked pleased at that. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Christy couldn’t stay, not and listen to the two of them pretending they knew what was at stake. When she left them, Sam followed after her.

“Jada will keep him in line, Christy. She’ll keep us in the loop, too.”

Christy tried to let her tension free. “I could trust her to look after the girls, like Lisa and April, but that man might be beyond her limits.”

“She’s tough, Christy. I’m sure she can handle him. I know you’ve really got on board with us, but maybe you’ve just gotta,” he laughed, “‘delegate’?”

“Find another project for us to do?” He had looked so hopeful at that, and for once, she didn’t immediately disabuse him of the moment. “Alright, how about some

perspective? You were the start of the Collective, weren't you? How did it happen? Someone approached you, I guess?"

"Yeah, it was about two years ago. I came over to study from Jamaica, but I've never really had the time for that, not with working, too. I fell into this thing called *Binder* instead, it's like a club, we've all got one or two words of an exclusive bound tattooed on us. Somewhere. I'd never thought of myself as an artist before that, but then the only time I'd ever drawn was when I had some throwaway bond to scrawl over. What chance did I have?" His face went darker—which Christy supposed must be a blush—as Samanya lifted his tee, then hesitated, before twisting his waistband down. At the tight crease where abdominal muscle met groin flesh, were the words 'if you may.' They curled around each other in a snail shape. Serifed. "Every word is supposed to be significant. Would you like to touch it?"

She would, and reached out with her sharp, glassy nail to trace the briefest 'if'...

"Ah." She had to withdraw her hand before he could continue. He swallowed, "Well, it doesn't exist anywhere else, it's supposed to be written in different fonts, in different skin tones. It's all meaningful." Samanya rearranged himself in his clothing. "No one knows anyone else involved, it's like a treasure hunt to find the others..." Christy shook her head at his implied question—she'd never heard of this before. "Well, I signed a waiver to say once I was gone... they could have the patch of skin." He laughed, self-indulgently nervous. "So then there was this woman." He had stopped then.

"Where did you meet?" she asked.

"It was in another club, like where I met you." He paused again. But not for long. "She knew who I was, and we started talking about stories. Then about bounds. About art. I was thinking about my new tattoo of course, but the woman—Zoe—was suggesting more. I don't know when she started telling me about Libraries—as like, an installation—but she must have trusted me by then. She was never my contact, just passed on my name to someone else who then dropped me coded bounds. That's how it started. It wasn't really much, not until I got a chance to bring Jada over from home, and she wanted in it as well."

"They've left the organisation of the collection to you?"

“Yeah. Supposed to be distributed, I guess. One gets caught, the others are still going.”

“You never wanted to know who was behind it all?”

“No way! Christy, that’s the point, isn’t it? If we knew, it wouldn’t be as good. Maybe there isn’t anyone ‘behind it,’ anyways?”

“What happened to Zoe?”

Samanya darkened again. “I’d rather we didn’t...” Then he laughed. “I haven’t seen her in a long time.” And Christy blushed. And realised that was good to hear.

“We’ve probably got a lot of time together while they’re off developing the catalogue, do you want to make up our Library?”

“Sure, sounds good! I’ve had a lot of new ideas.”

“How much do I owe you, Clinton?” said Christy. It was all very well, spending time with Sam and developing their collection, planning a perfect, distributed and yet deniable Library, but she wanted more than that. It niggled. So she had come back to her data miner, Clinton.

“Payment first? Trying to keep the sheet balanced, are you? Forget it. You know information is neither created nor destroyed; the fact I know of this now is payment enough. And I wouldn’t know about this without you pointing me to it.”

“Alright then, what?” There was no point in arguing with him, he knew his business.

“There are cells of your ‘Collective’ all over the world, Christy. I’ve only been able to identify the ones that’ve been broken open. Suspicious enough itself, but with some of the names you gave me for *Binder*, worse than that. They’ve been investigated of course, and your friend has probably been checked as well. But none of them add up to anything in particular. Most of the collections found haven’t had anything in common, not that I could see, just cellular ‘Libraries.’ And in my line of business, that’s a huge danger sign.” Clinton stopped, turning to look around them, in the wind by the top of Greenwich Mean.

When he was satisfied, he said, “Get out of this while you can. I mean it. I like you Christy, and this advice is coming to you pro bono, get out of it so you can come back

and work for me later.”

“Thanks, Clinton. You’ve got the map of it, I presume?”

He looked doubtful. “Should I really give you it?”

“Well you can’t destroy it, can you?” she said.

“Touché.” He handed her a hardcoded file. “Whatever this is, other groups are watching over it too.”

“I know that, and thanks, Clinton. I’ll be in touch.” She patted him on the padded tweed of his shoulder, and he smiled at that.

Later that night, Christy let herself sleep with Samanya.

The way they’d fallen into bed had actually been in reverse. Instead of learning the way the other body moved, by touch, by taste, they had learnt it by observation, familiarity and tension. Only their tufts of pubic hair had surprised either of them.

The next morning, she allowed herself a moment to admit how much she had wanted it, and how good it’d felt. Just for one moment, while she listened sleepily to the comforting sound of him pissing in the adjoining bathroom. Then it was business. They would work together; they would be together. Christy would learn whatever she could from him.

It wasn’t much. But it was more organised than she had been led to believe. Samanya wasn’t stupid, and he knew not to let too much spill. However, with Shades spending her time with the new guy, frictions had begun. Shades had taken on too much of Graham’s academia—a surprise to both her brother, and to Christy herself. Graham had opened up whole new realms of consequence to her, problems she had only glimpsed for the first, while raiding the depot with Christy. Turned out that Graham wasn’t a fool, he knew his bit. But while Shades started thinking long term with him, Samanya got impatient for a more visceral experience. He had begun to get nervous at how long it was taking.

“Jada used to drive the whole Collective forward. When I was thinking about the future, she would make sure we made KPIs and got to the drops. I know what you said about the catalogue being important, Christy—I know! It just doesn’t feel right that there isn’t anyone pushing, no one aggravating. You know?”

“I do. The two of us have spent so much time talking about what we could do once

we have the bounds, when maybe we should have been helping out with the practicalities of what we have now.”

“Then what should we do? The vault is going along well, Graham and Jada have the catalogue progressing, what?”

She grinned. “Maybe it’s time we took control of the whole project.” He’d looked confused, and then alarmed. “I mean for all of us, Sam! Make our stamp upon it, not just be the lap dogs of some rich guy—all he’s doing, whoever it is—is giving us the money. If we’re really going to do this, then we have to be free of distractions and express ourselves.”

“You’re mad!” He tackled her, and the two of them embraced. “No. Even I’m practical enough to realise that there’re strings that come with his finance.” She scowled. She wasn’t angry with him, but stiffened her body against him regardless.

“There’s not much we can do about that,” he said.

“We’ve already talked about what your sister and her activists have been up to—you said those attacks were against the rules you’d agreed to. I’ve been worried about where that could lead them, could lead to us. Maybe we have to get away from whoever started this?”

Samanya frowned, and held on to Christy more tightly. “That’s my fault, I should have said something to her about it.”

She turned to him, “No. You’re both... you’re so passionate. It was bound to fire up somehow. I just think we should plan for it, instead of falling into a hole.”

“What do you think, then?”

“Let’s start by figuring out what to do if things go wrong? I just don’t want any of us getting hurt. You’re too important to me.” It wasn’t entirely fabrication. *Jesus, if only it was.*

They talked about how to disappear, how to go underground. If Samanya realised she knew precisely what she was talking about, he never said anything. There were, after all, many reasons for a girl to go into hiding.

While the catalogue developed without them, they continued to butt their heads against inevitability.

“A controlled explosion...” she said. They hadn’t been discussing it at that

moment.

“Pardon me?” Samanya looked up from the bound he had been reading—they’d taken to reading silently together, the both of them in clammy, latex gloves. Turning the pages of his obsessions. As he’d stopped, confused, he put the bound down and snapped free of his gloves. Christy paused, swallowing against the sudden, erotic feelings that came with the rubber.

She said, “We have to make sure it blows up on us—the collection—but still have an unlikely way out.” He’d laughed. Confused. But Christy continued, regardless, “No, Sam. We’ve got to play it like a con.”

Nanograph Nine

Scotland – Orkney Islands – One-Year Ago

... To a better life... that's where the boats should have taken him. Not to this ruined place.

Where we are waiting, waiting for the right conditions to slip by: through the weather, the border men, through circumstance.

“All illegal immigrants to the left, visa-holders to the right.” Homer had swallowed his own mobile—and its ID chip—piece-by-piece before having left middle America. He had not wanted to be found, not until he was able to reveal himself in his own lime-lit triumph. Wouldn't that be lovely? If that were true. He'd not been read in a long time, and the best Writers of his generation were indifferent to his prose. His was the skill to write, but he had no skill in Writing; he had perfect phraseology, but could attract no great cloud of readers. He Authored. Perfectly. With no room for change or challenge.

Homer had starved for that. So there he stood, on an island off the coast of Scotland, hoping for a better life. And since the American Psychological Association had classified “Writer” as an illness six years ago, he stood as a medical refugee, and not only as an economic one.

“Father never understood,” he wrote, “as if I could stop it—once it had begun. I never shot that back at him; or to Mother; they had taught me to read, after all.” Shown him it was not only functional, but into the deep, dirty workings of the technique. How they had caught him, adolescently penciling upon the back of a rice-box, emptied of cereal. Writing is a secretive life, to look at the world, and understand what it means to your self, not merely Writing between others. “Writing,” “Reading,” that's only what they do, not who they are.

When he came to the head of the line, he said, “‘My name is Homer Williamson, I am a dissident Writer and Author seeking refuge.’” That was exactly, word for word what he said. He had quoted himself. Homer had pretended not to hear the dirty sniggering from behind him. But could not ignore the discomfort of the guard in front of him; this was new, the few occurrences of Authors coming out and seeking asylum. What

should his response be? Homer didn't know what would come from that, he had only been able to practice his own part.

So he found himself standing before the processing centre Superintendent Summers.

"Speak for yourself, then." The older man still hailed from a time when being a writer had been impressive. Homer could tell it, as the man's bristled face was drawn once again—in distress—down to the covers that Homer had torn from his own bounds. Had smuggled across the ocean. His documents. He reminded Homer of his own grandparents, who had understood, intellectually, that being a Writer was deficient, but had occasionally encouraged him all the same, by asking to be written into his stories. It was indulgent and strangely satisfying for them.

Homer tried to explain. "I've never had to—well, you see—it isn't like what you'd—no." The other man raised his unkempt brows. "I don't mean to sound as if I don't—" Homer took a breath. "Could I have a pencil and some bond?"

Once again, the Intendant expressed surprise. "Do we look as if we have any wealth here?" They did not, and likely they never would.

No, he wasn't going to be given that chance. Not so easily. Homer would have to think in past tense, and compose his speech that way. "I was made a dissident in my home for who I am. I must write, but I have no readers except for those who are secret. It didn't matter to me what I wrote, only that I reached out with my words." Homer had already expressed his dismay at that, and edited his speech accordingly. It was the time for a barest exposition.

"And you expect us to look after you now, to hide you from what you've done?" Summers had taken a look through the titles by then. Homer had written dangerous political screeds, and religious texts... whatever he could to get into real print. That had been his only chance to be read.

"Give me a chance..."

Summers nodded, "We should pity you."

Homer looked up at him, composing in his head, "And they reached out to me, offering whatever little they could, while I wrote the rich history of what was left of them."

It would only be the beginning. Writers who had made it that far, they'd written back to him—on those still curious pieces of folded bond—that their camp mates resented and despised their chosen "lifestyle."

But who had they been, those mysterious writers, who had said, "Come"? Still, it was heading to a better life... wasn't it?

It had not been long, however, until he knew for sure. Early morning, a camp guard woke him—and him alone—walking him to a loading bay.

"This is it today!" The guard called, to the head of a waiting truck. "Take these documents," he was told, "I've found you employment."

But could Homer believe him? He waited, the two men—guard, prisoner? Standing together.

"One?" Came the voice, and they both turned to see the tall man jump from the cab of the truck. As he came walking toward where they waited, Homer watched him cautiously. "And you're it? Alright," the new man waved the guard away. He went meekly. "So you're alone, and presumably frightened. You mustn't be, it's me that's been writing to you, and I have an offer for you that you simply won't be able to refuse." And Homer wasn't deaf to the ambiguity of that phrase. The tall man smiled. "We'll talk."

Chapter Ten

Graham

Greece – Rhodes – Now

“You were invisible—Emlen you were hiding right there! You were there when they shot Nicolas. You could have stopped them.” Emlen tried to pull Graham along with him again. “No. We can’t leave him there.”

“Graham,” Emlen stopped and said, “We have to get off the island now. The cover I bought us has—quite literally—blown. They know we’re here now, and they’ll be bringing in the Acquisitions team. Damn it, with Justin here himself, they’re probably already coming as we speak.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Emlen. How did that just happen—I thought they’d arrest him—” Tears pierced from his eyes, feeling like needles pushing out from the ducts.

Emlen crouched in the soft grass that lay there in the lee of their cover. “If you don’t want the same to happen to the both of us, you will get moving *now*.” As the helicopters burnt over the hilltop, Emlen and his steaming face appeared to burn—to smoulder. Graham stood, not sure if it was to argue or to follow him, and Emlen tore at his collar, pulling him back into a crouch. “Keep up. But keep low.” He dashed away, and Graham tried his best to follow.

Whatever cover it was that Emlen had bought for them, their way was lit by its wreckage. “Who did this?” Graham called.

“Tome raiders!” Emlen replied. “The natural enemies of Librarians.” He stopped by a low stone wall, only useful for curtailing errant sheep. “Still, it cost me. That will be the last of my ‘miracles,’ I can tell you that.” This was the first time that Graham had actually seen Emlen stressed.

“How are we getting off the island then?” Graham asked. He looked at this man, crouching by him, with the gun holstered at his side. “Will we have to shoot our way

out?”

Emlen frowned, then followed Graham’s gaze to the holster. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Graham! That’s not a gun, it’s a catalogue scanner. No,” he shook his head, and then squinted off the way they had come. “If we can get to the west end of the bay here, I have a boat waiting.” Graham looked back for the first time, and saw that the flames seemed to be dying away. “They’re moving in on us, Graham. I underestimated what they’d bring. Damn. I thought the raiders would have been big enough to block anything that came.”

Graham couldn’t understand him at all. “What were you planning for?”

Emlen just shook his head. “Keep on moving.” So they did. Graham followed Emlen as if on a lead, he couldn’t see any of the dangers that Emlen dodged around, but wasn’t willing to take the risk. He matched Emlen. Step by step.

They heard the sound of surf before they saw any beach, and as they came closer, rising out of that welcome sound—harmonised in the sway of it—came the hum. Then a luminous bulk developed; once hidden by the burning lights; now doused; the airship rose. Graham looked over his shoulder at it, a giant turbine, a lighter-than-air jet engine the size of a four-storey tenement.

“EMLEN! STOP!” it said. Spotlights hammered the both of them into stark view. But Emlen didn’t stop, instead, dragging Graham over the lip of the hill to a view of the sea. “YOU MUST!”

As they came to a brief halt, Emlen took a breath, muttering, “No. Not yet, Justin,” as his only, enigmatic response. But Graham didn’t have a moment to consider that.

“I thought it’d be a beach!” Graham gasped. And Emlen laughed at him. They were at the top of a rocky cliff, looking down on to black ocean.

Emlen stretched out his hand, “There. That’s where we’re heading.” As if that was enough. Graham saw nothing. Then Emlen jumped.

“Jesus.” As he thought of the faceless Writer they’d left behind them.

Graham didn't know if he jumped after Emlen, or if the second spotlight that had found him had been a push. As he went down, all lights were cut by the cliff's umbra. The moment he hit felt like the moment of striking the ground out of a dream. Every muscle spasmed in the water. It tightened around him as he struggled. Sank. Finally, as he gave up, he felt the pounding in his head, and knew it was an acknowledgement of his own subservience to breath. Then the last of his lungs eased away through his lips, and showed him the way.

He swam up through the concrete.

The surface broke on his face, as he had fallen drunkenly on pavement so often himself.

He was still lost, but followed his best guess regardless.

"Here! You idiot," called Emlen, hanging onto the side of a low boat, likely no more than two feet away over the breaks. He grabbed at Graham, and they both climbed aboard the sharp-edged craft.

Graham fell over the bow of it first. "Can this thing. Can it outrun them?" he asked it of nothing, then rolling onto his back, he looked once again into the sky. "Thank God."

"Not a fucking chance," said the captain, as she pushed him away onto his side, and obscured the green algal bloom of the airship maneuvering above. She secured Emlen for herself. "But that giant thing isn't nimble on that jet engine, and it can only turn at continents. Fast, but dumb."

Emlen nodded he was in and the captain only scowled, before stepping over them both to the controls. While crouching as low as he—practicably—could, Graham watched numerous spotlights sweep across the waves. "Time to go," she said. The boat's engines gunned, and Graham felt he would have thrown up—if he'd still had a stomach.

Bioluminescence has a tendency to smear light across eyesight as it is, but their speed stretched the glowing blimp from zenith to far past horizon. Within a moment they were gone. The boat through waves, more like a train tunneling through a mountain.

“I expect you’ll be paying for evasions, Emlen?” asked the captain over the wind.

“Oh, just take it from your expenses, Julia, do whatever you need to.”

“Wow. It’s going that well, then?” She appeared to be pleased by that—*in irony?* Then the wind shrank Graham’s wet clothes against him, and she accelerated away. The wind speed was so sheer that the excess water actually chilled, flaking away as ice behind them.

“They wanted me to lead them to you.” Graham hadn’t stopped his tirade, since the “blessed shock”—as Emlen said it—had begun to wear off. “They wanted me to lead them to you, the Librarians were only there for you. You were there and just let them kill Nicolas.” Julia had left them on the shores of the Aegean, and they sat on a train hurtling through one of the new, slow-growing smart woods on past the border of Turkey.

“I’m sure they would have had him shot without either of us, Graham, stop being so, so self-centric. However, it can’t really be a surprise that they’d be after the two of us.” The smell of the local trees being burnt ahead in the engine car, smelted for the golden nano-particles caught in the wood, sparked unusual synaptic connections inside Graham’s head.

He looked over at Emlen, lit in the red glow of the trees optimised for carbon capture. “There’s something you’re not telling me.” He knew it. As both mystic knowledge, and paranoid schizophrenic travelogue.

“Free-associate on your own time, Graham. Perhaps there is a connection to be found, but I’m not sure they’ll let us free to find it unless we can stay ahead of them. I still have some friends to draw upon, and I have Nicolas’ bound.” Emlen patted the satchel beside him. “I’m sure there must be a key to it, to both our interests and to that of the Library’s.”

“You said his name was ‘Justin’? The man who ordered him shot.”

“Sir Justin Fortesque, yes, he’s their head. The two of us have clashed in the past, but I didn’t expect to see him there on Rhodes. Perhaps they already know what it is

we're looking for. And I don't like that... Now you know why we couldn't trust to go to them, however, not without true evidence to protect us. They'll kill to keep their secrets." Graham shuddered, and Emlen msgd them an order for stim. "I'm going to take us up to Amsterdam, I've friends there who have no love for the Library."

Another passenger brought them their stim, passing from the tearoom back to his own cabin—working as distributed wait staff—Emlen drifted into stupor.

Their car burned its way across undergrowth of mutated, fractal leaves and algorithmic bushes. Graham kept wondering if the absurd leaps of consciousness he felt was what it must be like to be on *Inspiration*, or if it was actually the strange foliage, burning in the engine car at work.

Finally, disembarking at Amsterdam Central, Emlen asked, "How do you feel about prostitutes, Graham?" Then laughed at Graham's surprise.

"Wait, now you have an extensive network of women on your payroll?"

"Not quite. When it became en vogue for whores to name themselves after old Authors, their paramours and 'inspirations,' we all saw an opportunity."

"Who are 'you all'?"

Why did he bother? Emlen merely continued, "I'm going to send you to Jane Eyre, she'll look after you while I decide where we can transfer." He gave Graham an address, "Ask for Charlotte, her Madame. You'll have a tab, but do try and select from the lower shelf, will you? My credit is running a tad dry."

"And you're going to hide behind your own woman?"

"DH, actually, but essentially, that's correct. Not many in the underworld will actually invite you into their homes, not and lend you their security—more likely to shoot you in the back..." Emlen had the grace to say that last under his breath. Then he sucked in a great lungful! "Your saviour lies in a bordello! Take it while you can, Graham, and don't underestimate the women's street skills—prostitutes were recently recognised by the academy, you know? For their 'prior learning' and business skills." They walked by cafes, all selling the same menu of real coffee, sweet weed, and pastries

fuzzy with weakly cultivated *Inspiration*. “Sign on to the black node mobile I gave you, at six this evening. Try and sleep until then, if you can.”

After Emlen hailed him a ped, and Graham had awkwardly—exhaustedly—climbed aboard, Emlen walked away. Graham gave the rider the address, and she nodded, “Charlotte, got it.” Stood on her toes, jumped and turned her catalyst pedals, taking off.

Amsterdam was worse than Graham had remembered it. Since the rest of the Netherlands had walled-off the tourist section of the de Wallen, even the local colour was gone. All the businesses had shifted over to a time-share model, and they were being run—badly—by visiting day-trippers. It was merely a conceptual destination now, a virtualised engagement between visitors who might otherwise be neighbors back at home.

At least what had been culture was now convention, and Graham didn’t have to be confused by any real change.

“That’s us, then,” the rider said. When he fell off, she waited patiently. Probably for the absent ‘ping’ from his mobile that was never to come.

“I’ve only got cash, sorry.”

She rolled her eyes, “I hope you’ve got exact change then, cause I don’t carry, myself.” She should have expected that, though. *Of course a guy would take cash to a whorehouse*. Graham hadn’t even thought to tell her otherwise at the start of their trip. He counted out a thick sheaf of Euros in their lurid blue, and watched the punk girl, in her ‘hawked, spray-on helmet, fumbling to put the money somewhere. “Thanks, guy.” She had blushed while he watched—she was actually rather pretty—then finally raised her brows at him and pedaled off.

Here I am! he knocked on the door.

The woman who answered it gave him a look, and nodded him in, “Expecting you.”

He stepped around her, slipping inside. “Oh God,” he said. The décor was a

Disney nightmare of Victoriana, including many incongruous clippings of the Queen—each pic of her, as played by a myriad of different actors.

“I know!” said Charlotte. “But we are a timeshare business, after all, so have to make-up for the least offensive of takes. Wait, you weren’t looking for the ambiance, were you? Coming from Emlen, I just figured you’d be all business.” Charlotte was halfway to undoing her absurd bonnet—and while they had actually been in style for a brief moment in ‘twenty-one, this was more “Bo-peep,” than mirrored “razor grrl.”

“Ah, no, that’s fine.” He had considered taking some company, but realised how wrong that was under the circumstances.

“Oh good. Would you like a drink, then? Belle,” she called around the corner, “Would you get Mr King a... whiskey? Gin? A beer?”

“Mr King,” Graham smiled, so that was his name now, was it? Nice to see Emlen had prepared him well for his part. Once again. “Graham, actually. And no, I’ll just have a tea, or a stim.” He’d given up on wanting more. What Graham actually wanted, was to sleep.

“I’ll show you around the place,” she winked, “while it brews.” They stood awkwardly for a moment, while Belle came around and asked him how he’d like it, as he had admitted to a boy, who’d come out of the servant’s quarters, that “no” he didn’t have a bag. Charlotte stood by politely and then took him upstairs. “Sorry, your tea will take a while, none of us actually know how to make leaf tea—not like the freeze-dried kind at home—something to do with distillation, as they tell me it. Still, gives us a chance to talk over why you’re here. Do you mind if I ask, is Emlen still happy with our arrangement?”

Oh right, looks like I should be in reviewer mode. “That’s why I’m here, to report back.”

She blushed—but it might have been the exertion of the steps, plus her corset. Graham looked closely, and noticed the ripcord along the side of it. “Fine. You were here to check Jane, am I right?” Of course they both knew that. “She’s with someone in her reading room at the moment, but I could show you the Bertha Antoinetta room?” He

shook his head. “Or another,” she laughed, allowing him to think whatever it was that conjured. “Literary theme rooms are so popular! What with Amsterdam’s permissive take on *Inspiration*, and the low rent of textual gimmicks.”

“Do many of your clients have literary aspirations?” he asked carefully.

“No! Christ! They just like the feeling of having a really good idea while they’re getting it off. You’ve obviously been spending too much time around Writers; they’re the only ones who get anxious about that kind of thing. No, we’re sure to match a clean strain of it with clear text. Straight genres here, thank you.” She looked at him, measured him. “Nothing ‘experimental.’ Best leave that to those who struggle writing new text. The poor bastards, addicted to writing themselves out of it.” She shook her head.

Graham remembered the few AA meetings he had been to. *Yeah, trying to write themselves through their Minotaur’s maze*. He didn’t think he was in the same trouble that they were—*Inspired*—or any one of the few genetically predisposed to the same psychosis. “Writer.” Surith had been right, after all, Graham just wanted to be an Author, to own the property itself.

He was relieved that Charlotte took it seriously; making sure her *Inspiration* was keyed to a specific text, and not an ambiguous strain. And Graham knew he was safe, unless she’d ever had clients wanting prints on information management.

“The Catherine Earnshaw room is free.”

“Oh Christ. Is it?” They rolled their eyes together.

They looked over the carefully decored rooms, with texts printed on every available surface, and at the refrigeration rooms keeping row after row of petri dishes. Then after the tour, Graham was given a room in which to sleep. He had line after line in his mind’s eye; having read it off of cheap bond, papered to the walls; stitched into the bed spreads; lead-lighted over window panes—and he had been envious of Shades’ mirror glasses for the first time. The pale bond. Fading black ink. Merely shadows etched on the oblong page of the wall, precursor to their own palimpsest. He closed his eyes on that thought.

He hadn't read any of Nicolas' bound, unwilling to crack that spine, had only seen the title page to verify its corpus. That page. Stiff bond, as if erect amongst a field of bounds. Each wrought with a pithy title, a date and a name. "*Here wrote Nicolas Flemming,*" remembered and unread as a tombstone. "Tomestone," as much dead as having his clay tablet found, buried six feet deep in desert sand.

Graham crunched by the dry litter of keyboards under foot, under a sky the colour of set ink, a sky that flaked away dry to reveal its bare stars. It reminded him of his catalogue, a database of the dead. There was Nicolas, and that just as well could have been Dame Judy over there. When he saw himself, it should have been a surprise, but instead he assumed it meant something else.

He stalked around the bond, looking for real Writers. But saw only mute dedications. He started by tearing the tomestones free of their bindings, stacking them in frantic order. Re-ordering, shuffling, and he looked for other pages that would say it better. When that failed, he strode across the landscape, reading, making the damnation he knew best. Interpretation.

It didn't stop. He knew that. It never stopped.

When Graham woke, he rose, and tore fingers down his face, then as he looked at his hands, he thought he must be bleeding ink. Until he realised, it was only the cheap ink from the copies they'd checked earlier, running with his sweat. Not stigmata as he'd feared.

He stood before the whores in clothes borrowed from past clients. "That should do you, Gray, god knows how long you'd been in those others," Charlotte wrinkled her nose. *But she isn't wearing a suit laundered of blood and cum, is she?* Not that it looked bad on him, steel mesh top and ur-leather pants.

"Are these embossed with what I think it is?" He felt taller. It reminded him of when he'd never cared about being reduced to an alliterative moment. They had called him "Gray." Now he felt dangerous. once again.

"Yes, the ur- is geneered from the skin off his fingertips. From the exact swatches

they took from him. After his being ink-printed for crimes against fashion.”

Blue-blackened, recursive swirls, touching up the legs of the suit and fingering his groin. “I remember that trial. Only place they could get the mad bastard, on ‘fashion.’” Ridiculous to be wearing ur-leather pants made from a mass-murderer’s fingerprints, but then, that was what style was about. After Graham had awoken from his dream, he’d dressed in his own clothes and gone downstairs to have breakfast with his hostess. Of course, it had actually been served as high tea, “Graham,” had said Charlotte, “we eat our props.” Still, he had forced himself to swallow.

It was only late afternoon when they'd finished dressing him more appropriately for Amsterdam—truth be told, neither the mismatched blacks he’d been wearing since the Atrium, nor his usual, more serious suits, ever complimented him as well as those clothes did.

He scrawled in his signature, connecting the black node device Emlen had given him. Six pm.

“Graham, I presume. Charles will be with you imminently.”

“DH?” asked Graham, into the mobile.

“To you, yes. Have my counterparts been good to you?”

“Yes, thank you...” This DH seemed particularly amused, as if what he was saying was merely a game.

“I understand you’ve been on a lovely train ride recently,” DH said, as one humours a child.

“—Oh don’t play with him, Lawrence,” came Emlen’s voice behind him on the line. “And hand me that over here.”

“—Through the Webwood? You don’t take me anywhere,” DH finished, completing his part, by a rustle on the line as the voices switched.

“Graham. The Yab Yum Memorial. One hour. Repeat it.”

“The Yab Yum Memorial? In an hour.” He assumed he could figure that out.

“Don’t be late, and be ready to travel. Eat the card.” The line went dead and Graham glanced around awkwardly, though he knew he had been left alone to call Emlen as discreetly as was possible. He slipped the encryption card free to tear it up into rags with his teeth and swallow it. It didn’t seem such a stupid precaution now he had seen more of the consequences to being found.

Charlotte asked him if he needed a tour guide. Graham wasn’t sure he should take her up on that, and was certain that Emlen wouldn’t have. What could he say? *That I don’t trust her, after giving me a room and clothes—even those damn cucumber sandwiches.* But he merely thanked her for her hospitality.

“Oh, don’t thank me. Truth of it is, Mr King, is that this is on script. I don’t know who you or your ‘Emlen’ are, but I presume that the character does. She’s a cybertext, each of us on loan to her franchise, we just put on our inputs,” she faltered, “We tell the character something, and she routes the query somewhere else on the Metatext—some of it is pre-programmed, some of it comes from an actual Writer. Then we act it out. For all I know, ‘Mr King’, you’re behind this, and I’ve only been complimenting yourself.”

“Still, you’ve been genuinely good to me,” he tried.

“... Then you don’t know how well Charlotte has been written. I could send Jane with you, she is who you requested, after all?”

“Well maybe that would be alright? I really don’t know where I’m going.” The woman playing Charlotte nodded, as if she had expected that—maybe she did? Clicked her fingers, which the house interpreted as a chime.

When the red-haired captain from the speed boat came down the stairs, making her entrance in the sitting room, Graham didn’t know what to say.

“Jane, can you direct this man—Mr King—to wherever it is he requires. I shouldn’t have to ask you to be discreet.”

“Of course, Ma’am.” And still, the joke in her eyes was in character.

They took their leave of the brothel, exiting out on to the alley. “I expected you would wait up for me, Graham, I wasn’t going to be long.”

“I... just figured once I was in, it didn’t matter. You were busy.” He looked at her, graying red hair, dressed in Victorian lace.

“Of course I was. Best way to get a date: get a guy up on *Regency*. Feels almost as good as the real thing,” she explained. “Don’t touch it myself, mind you.” She stopped him at an indistinct corner. “You were supposed to make contact with me, not with that meta.”

“Were you hiding out as well?” He didn’t know what to think, putting the captain and this woman together.

“This is one of my other jobs.” She must have known what he was thinking. “Don’t be so puritanical, the clients play their role—they have to! We give them the proper genre; it goes from there. It’s better than being on my feet ten hours a day in retail.”

Julia—the Captain—pulled him along behind her. He suspected that they were following a middle-aged couple when she zoomed in on them and took a photo on her mobile. “Those two are tour-surfing toward the Yab—” she laughed at his sudden glare, “Yeah, I listened in on your call through a hole in the wall. For a paranoid, Emlen can overlook the damn obvious. Follow the two of them, they’ll take you there in time to meet him. I’d rather not get any closer to Emlen now than I possibly have to!”

“Fuck. Thanks!” Graham had to call back to her, as Jane/Julia had stopped walking, and he felt himself pulled away behind the couple, by the familiar draw of their metadata. He could almost feel their data wake, even without the need of a mobile. Graham spared a quick glance away from them, but she had dropped out from sight immediately. He switched back to following the couple in their spy regalia—he figured the matching red hats must be mentioned on their tour-surfing profile, to further aid in recognition. He briefly considered introducing himself, but noticed the way they seemed to be taking turns to watch behind them in show-front windows, and he decided not to spoil their fun.

Instead he just waited for Emlen, who suddenly walked into view from behind him. “Finally,” he said, as Graham started in surprise!

“Emlen!” *Shit.*

“Keep walking. Things aren’t going quite right, we’re still on the run.” Emlen was admonishing him? Graham hadn’t gotten them into this mess. “I’ve organised another safehouse for us. I need time to study Nicolas’ bound.”

“God, where are we going now?” Graham knew he had no choice but to go along with him.

“Down along the border between Belgium and France, to Villeneuve d’Ascq. It’s one of the old French technopoles, and I have friends there. Well, they host one of my libraries, at least. It’s another train for the two of us, Graham! I do love the romance of train travel; the buzz of induction, the total disconnect as our frictionless capsule glides by the world... meditative. Do you agree?” Emlen, striding before him as usual, held back his hand, as if offering Graham to have it, and they pushed past the tourists on their way to the station.

“Another of your libraries?” Graham had the feeling that Emlen had his whole hand dug deep into the pie-mixture. Were they walking along his library now? Streets, tenement numbers and maps, a satellite-spied catalogue...

“I play the role of their interior decorator. They’re part of the ‘nano-riche’—income racing to match micro-expenditure with micro-payments—they have to maintain a zero-sum, or be taxed by the discrepancy of it. So I supplied them a solution, to pay for rolling licenses on cheap, ex-region bounds. They buy them by the shelf metre. They rent decor, and I source them bounds. It’s very *en vogue*.”

“‘Ex-region,’ printed in another language I guess? Cheaper licenses?”

“You’re getting it! Yes, it’s a library they can’t read, kept solely for tax purposes. Of course, if anyone expected them to be reading it, the licenses would be astronomical.” He leaned in to Graham’s space. “So let’s keep it mum, yes?”

Graham found himself grinning, lips drawn back as if electrocuted. “Sure.” Emlen nodded, and finally stopped him at a bar in the train station.

Looking at him. “You look good, Graham, you’re reverting to your pseudonym?”

Graham appraised the two of them in the bar's mirror. "At least we match now. I figured the steel and leather might be better armour for whatever was ahead." Emlen nodded. "It does feel good though. Charlotte said I didn't fit in wearing anything less ostentatious, and somehow I couldn't help myself but agree with her."

"Clothes are symbolic, Graham, simile and not metaphor. I'm glad you're beginning to understand that." Graham kept quiet.

The trip was an uneventful fade-transition. As unreal as Emlen had said it would be, the countryside flickering by as if through a Vaseline blurred lens.

They arrived at the chateau late that night. By design. Emlen having kept them circling round the neighborhood for more than an hour. "Easier by far, to arrive bedraggled and late, than to have to answer their questions on why the two of us are here at all."

The couple had gotten out of bed to let them in. They had not asked anything, instead, deciding to leave that till the morning.

Emlen requested just the one room for them, and that was where they awkwardly stood as they waited for their hosts to fall back into dream-stuff.

"What will you tell them tomorrow morning?" Graham looked around the room: provincial French, with lace on the bedspread and hi-res pics of imaginary pastoral scenes upon the walls. He picked up a gorgeous Bible by the head of the bed. It was printed in Armenian.

"Nothing at all. I may have to engineer a work catastrophe—or some such—for the two of them. They'll be too busy to bother us." He sat and untied his shoes. "I wonder if they'll ever put two and two together? I'm always the harbinger of disaster." Emlen sighed ghastily—at his disasters, or on removing his left shoe, Graham was left unsure.

"And so we just wait it out a bit longer? Then to another safehouse, and another? When will we stop running, Emlen?"

The Librarian had looked up at him gravely. "That's the nature of the game you

bought yourself into, ‘Gray.’” Graham felt a chill, he suddenly remembered those same words, spoken by Emlen to that wretch of a salesman in the secondhand store.

“This is exactly what you wanted, isn’t it? I mean... maybe not...” Graham stopped. No. Could he actually say that Emlen had wanted Nicolas dead? “You live like this, don’t you?” Glancing around the room.

“I have a mission, and nothing is going to stop me completing it. Go to sleep. You can take the left side of the bed.” Then, without waiting for a response, he finished stripping to his underwear, and slipped between the sheets. Graham had no choice but to follow, as Emlen had clicked off the light switch.

When he awoke, he found Emlen already up and out. Graham briefly considered that perhaps Emlen had drugged him again. He wasn’t usually such a deep sleeper, not to wake when his bed partner rose. But then, these were not usual circumstances. He used the adjoining washroom, then pulled-up his new ur-leather trousers—still clammy from the day before; it was like waking from an afternoon siesta. Looking at the bed, he thought of making it, but discarded the idea as useless discipline.

“You’re up,” Emlen smiled, plumping a hotdrop into a waiting mug of stim, and pushed the suddenly steaming drink across the counter to him. As Graham drank it, Emlen turned the handwritten note to him; it said that their two hosts had an emergency, and that, “Sorry we can’t be there for you.” “That’s all right, isn’t it? We can entertain ourselves,” Emlen smiled. Graham felt the beginning of fear, what had Emlen engineered for their hosts? But immediately quashed it. *Why bother?*

“I’m going to weed my collection here. You can rest, or fret, whatever it is you wish. Feel free to raid the larder,” he winked. Stood. Pulled the goggles he habitually wore back down over his eyes, the lenses flashing while Emlen fished optic cables from his suit, slotting them around the glasses like whiskers. When he was done, the headdress pulsed with light.

“What on earth needs that kind of bandwidth? What can you see through those?”

He grinned back at Graham, “Focus-active layers. I have the whole world cross-

referenced here.” He tapped the glasses. “I’ll be back.” Graham sighed as the luminescent monster walked away.

He didn’t really know what to do with himself, but took pleasure in keeping out of Emlen’s way all the same. The house was not only well-appointed, but Emlen had been right, their ostentatious shelves of bounds could only indicate there was indeed a scam of sorts being run. Of course he had visited rich homes in the past, attended parties; dressed much as he was now, in fact, and named Gray, too. However, those houses, those *Libraries* such as the Atrium, they had not a tenth of the bounds in the chateau. In just this room.

It was surreal. Discomforting. These were not the pitiful softcovers of Robert’s store—thick pads of bond from before the turn of the millennium, made to be rubbish—the bounds in the chateau had been intended to live in places of power: now flotsam, a nexus of cultural patchwork. He could think of nothing more postmodern than that, and it frightened him.

Instead, he took his mug and strode from the kitchen, with its bounds of unpopular cuisines, and stopped in the modern conservatory to take in a little sun.

But even out there were antique, free-standing lecterns standing around the frame and glass room. The stands had become popular, empty or not, as bounds had transcended their own economic significance. People generally hung their coats upon them. These three had incomprehensible bounds laid open upon them—ironically, three rather graphic, anatomical prints. He didn’t want to look at those. From his own recent experience, they were too real...

Graham stood by a window, and stuttered his fingertips along the spines of bounds arrayed upon a low shelf. He listened to the dulled keyboard of his fingers on the bounds.

“Shit. Now where?” He sipped from his mug. He wasn’t even getting a buzz from his stim.

Graham rested the mug on top of the shelf, and squatted to browse. Could he read any of them? Strictly speaking, most of the world spoke English, but the dialects of it

were “diverse.” Linguists called it Globish; impossible to read all its words, but the shared grammar had made computer translation perfect.

Half a shelf in—having flicked through an unpopular philosophy treatise, a few biographies—sans sex scandal—and, *That seems familiar...*

“Emlen,” he called, looking at a particularly awkward table of figures. Yes, he remembered that. Even the title page and acknowledgements had been translated. “Emlen!”

“What is it?” Emlen came. Looking over his shoulder, Graham could see he still wore his goggles. Graham held up the bound.

“It’s my bound!” Graham read the chapter heading—in its Spanglish. “‘*Sobre la normalización de las folcsonomías*,’ well it’s almost mine.” He looked back up at Emlen. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Hand it over. Yes. It should be. Even translated... yes, I can run it through the matrix for common mislations... compare this source text with the corrupted version... the tolerance for drift error can’t be figured without running through for variance... but, yes, this should do. Excellent work, Graham, I’ll take it now. Keep by, however, I may require your sense of Authorial intention to crack this yet.” Graham felt torn between the two of them—bound and Emlen—but knew he really had no choice.

“Take it.”

“Of course, of course...” came back from Louis, their host, home from his “disaster.” “Of course, of course...”

Graham felt his dislocation more than anything else; there, in that absurd house, given the task to drink the two of them—Louis and Cath—under their dining table. Of course, given his own extensive training, he could have done that any time over the last few years. Now it was less fun. Instead, he had watched the two of them try and keep up with him. They had devolved, while he had stayed clear-headed. He both envied, and pitied the two of them.

“We should go to bed, Louis...” Cath had consistently slurred on just the one word her whole night of being drunk: her partner’s name. “Goodnight, Stephen.” Graham nodded at that, and watched as she put her wine glass down, so, so delicately, that it had another half an inch to go before it touched the table when he’d thought she was to let it go. Instead, she pushed it through that last breath of air.

“Bed,” agreed Louis. So they had gone.

Graham waited impatiently, drinking their red, drinking the dregs of their glasses while they retired. They had accepted Emlen’s need for privacy, to his “new collection,” though Graham had struggled with that. He wanted to be a part of unearthing whoever had been behind stealing his work. He wanted to be with his bound—whether he could read it or not. But how could he be? Emlen and he were on the run, and he had to keep the lie of their visit alive. He drank the rest of the red, and sucked it through his teeth.

“What have you found?” He had finally gotten away from the over-stuffed lounge, and into the study.

Emlen looked up. Graham had expected him to have the bounds and a feeder before him, working. But as he entered, Emlen only had Graham’s bound, along with Nicolas’, in front of him. Staring at the two.

“This is so much worse than I thought. This will be war!” Emlen looked back down, closing the two bounds, and spun them around to Graham. “I knew the two of them were similar. I’d read your book electronically, after you raised your ruckus when it was altered. But of course I hadn’t seen an original, now having the two of these together... Nicolas’ Ransom *was* linked to mine. And to yours’. I think these bounds could be used, not to find information, but to hide it. They continue the work of my own hacking protocols. Within these,” he patted them, while Graham tried to put that information together. “With these, you might be able to hide an entire library. A black library.” The gasp with which he said that managed to make even Graham shudder—his concentration shot—though he couldn’t really understand why. “It’s terrible. And not just for the loss of culture,” he waved that away. “I know you don’t understand it yet. But if this information got out around the world, the whole basis for our economy—

balanced between Librarians, Agents and Houses—it would be shattered. We’ve been able to maintain it, because we—damn it, the *Librarians*—have controlled the metadata. They’ve sold it to the Houses in order to supply books to the world. And Agents held the two of them to order. This,” jabbing at Graham’s bound... “would destroy all that.”

“They’d start fighting each other?”

“Yes. Graham, what you’ve seen is a cold war, each policing the other. This could start a real war, in the streets of London and Manhattan.” He was serious. “I don’t know what—I can’t handle this alone. We have to take this back to the Librarians. Graham...”

“What? They’ll kill us! Christ!” He recoiled, suddenly aware that the other man had truly alien intentions.

“No they won’t.” He lunged up at Graham. “They wouldn’t.” Emlen caught his arm, having sent the desk before him thudding away into the plaster wall, the bounds skidding away. “Not if we bring them this. Damn it! I agree with you, we couldn’t keep this up, running away from them. Maybe this is perfect. We can buy our way out. That’s how you can look at it, anyway, if you like. I know this is bigger than that. We have to do this, it’s the only way.”

Nanograph Ten

Scotland – Perthshire – One-Year Ago

Cachet was sleeping rough on a beach close to Perth. He was wrapped tightly in his overnight cocoon—membrane thickened by the early morning’s dew. He’d picked the site for its isolation. And the proximity to a colony of Post-humanist-demi-transtopians... he shook his head, whoever they were, they never read. Dedicated to “deprogramming” from socio-cultural norms, they engaged with media on an iconic level only. “Sine symbolis sapientes” —Jesus Christ! Though that was probably their whole point. Cachet had read a doco on the ‘text some years ago; their philosophy—if you could call it that—was the social equivalent of black-bagging a cultist, and electrocuting their gonads till they came to their senses.

He squirmed in his bag. The pebbles crunching, embedded in the gel-like surface. Then he twisted his head back following the convenient line of a plane’s high-off contrail down to Earth. His head swam and his eyes met those of the Pole. She appeared to smile. But upside down, his head could have been easily tricked.

“My contacts traced you here by a book,” she said. “You do know the ‘topians flag all textual traffic as it’s incoming?” If he’d thought of it, he would have.

She drank her stim calmly, while waiting for him to extract himself. When he was out of the cocoon, the woman nodded over to where a cup of his own sat on the abandoned picnic table he’d camped by. He tried to smile in gratitude, but instead just walked over and straddled the bench. She followed. “So you are the same woman who offered me the job.”

“Two years, thirty-eight days ago. Yes.”

“We’ve never been introduced?” he asked, but wasn’t even sure if it was a genuine question himself.

“Agent Christine Choinski,” she replied. So he figured they never had.

“Have you been following me?” Cachet looked down into the stim. It was from a local store, there was no lid; Christine had brought full fixings for him to choose from.

“I saw you, you fool! When you hacked your last bound. You lost me in the fray, sure, but did you think I wouldn’t recognise the man I’d warned-off so long ago? Of

course I was going to catch up to you.”

“So what do you want?”

“Just tell me where the bound has gone, Cachet.” She leant in to him as if in love.

But it wasn't that, he could tell. “I couldn't tell you, Agent Choinski. The paradox of my work is that if I'm good—I'm too good. I couldn't tell you who had it if I wanted to.”

She turned her cheek, and hid her shamed face. “This isn't a game, Cachet, this is my life. It's what I love.” There it was.

“And it isn't mine? What do I have but this? I made my choice.”

“I protected you! You were mine to make sure you didn't go wrong.” Neither of them could believe she'd said that. Surely?

He found himself shaking his head violently. “No! No, this is how it has to be. The two of us fighting like this. I knew what I wanted when you—you—first warned me away.”

“This is the ruin of everything I've built, you can't be so selfish.” What could she know? Cachet had known this was never going to be an easy run; when the pay was that damn good...

“What are we going to do? You could only kill me.” Choinski began to reply to that, but he stopped her before she could retort. “Really, Mzz Agent,” ha, “I'm not going to come about behind you, claiming how wrong I've been, so your supervisors can get off your back. ‘Unrepentant,’ that's me. But you're the one who has me at the disadvantage. I know what I do to your Agent's work. Fuck, what it means to the Houses themselves. What do you do?”

“The Houses won't let me let you live.”

They spoke into the rising day—literally, each of them away from the other, blind, in to the Sun.

Still, her visit had to end in only one way, Cachet tagged to the sand by his own font-tipped needles.

Killing him was the only way for her to get on. And get out.

Chapter Eleven

Christy

London – Canonbury – Now

She woke in her one room studio. Christy had lived there since shortly after her defection, almost a whole year before. She had very little packed away in the space, only her precious clothing and tools, tied ready to run in a constrictor bag. Everything else she needed could be bought cheaply every week or so, and then discarded. She wrinkled her nose—there was almost nothing to see, nothing to situate her, few cues to show her it was home—instead, she sniffed. For the daubs of perfume she had dotted around the room. Christy always tried to match the scents of whoever she'd met with something from a bottle—or that she could put together herself. With her eyes closed again, she inhaled. There was the heart note of Rachel's citrus perfume, and over by the foot of the bed, was as close as she had come to matching Sam's personal half-life; week long fermented grass clippings, churned through new earth. She smiled. It was almost like not living alone. The shame was she wore no scent of her own—*security and all that*. Christy frowned and opened her eyes. No one else was there, but she had almost felt at peace.

Having risen, she selected items from her wardrobe of rice-pulp bags and removed the clothing labels with a snap. Part of the trick she'd learnt was to layer different shapes and textures, to confound many automated search routines. She put on black leggings and a short skirt, with a tweed print set at forty-five degrees. A brown, three quarter length coat and a gray tie over her maroon shirt. Her usual, custom boots completed the outfit—she had filled the grooves on the soles with latex cement the night before, and retooled them. So even her footprints were new.

She grabbed her bag—checked her ID and scan gun—and after hanging it across her body, she went out toward work. On the way through she picked out a selection of organic, breakfast sushi: golden rice and melon, smoked herring and pickled wasabi. The street market she bought them at was basically a parking lot, each stall a three-wheeler ped. She had figured it would be there on the day, because her traffic update had

informed her of a blockage through that route to work. She smiled back at the girl who had served her, and screwed the second earpiece back into place. Hers' were stranger devices than the usual; programmed, not to over-play the outside world, but instead using external mics to amplify the conversations around her—particularly any talk which surrounded certain, keyed words. “Echelon” brand. All was quiet inside them, however, and she relaxed into the gentle nudging of the devices as they directed her on her way toward work. *Thank you*, that the traffic routes were free, but the adspace on attendant Metatext maps were not.

Finishing the rice tubes as she walked, Christy entered the Borough of Islington, pirouetting at street corners. She liked to show the surveillance different faces wherever she knew her picture would be taken. It was routine now. Since even before the Collective's disaster at the Atrium Library, weeks before. Her boots rose almost an inch, responding to the perversely re-created cobblestone streets; she had the sense that, heritage be damned, they'd actually been laid to dissuade further traffic. Fine by her. It was in fact a lovely neighborhood—at least if you disregarded the current vogue of spraying the clean brick faces with fake soot. She passed the Angel, and turned at the Green, down onto the alleyway of her Centre.

Monday morning... the kids were still hanging there, dropped-in before school began. She squeezed by a group of preteens.

“Morning Mzz Cho!” Like a buzz. She stopped and smiled.

“Benjamin.” Nodded. Looked at the “Mural”—if they were being generous; which the admin were—he'd sprayed on the front wall of the Centre. “Lovely streetscape, and is that you and your friends?”

“And that's you, Mzz,” he smiled brightly. It was a nice idea, giving the kids agency over their own environment. In fact, they'd more of a say than an adult would, trapped between heritage listing and environmental futures. Supposed to give them a chance to make over their neighborhood the way it suited them.

“Thank you!” She looked again, as a person and not an educator, and almost laughed. His “Mzz Cho” showed a strong inspiration of Picasso-style Cubism, whilst his other figures were in more traditional child-style. Her tattoo'd face was as accurate as a photograph. “I think you've found a good likeness of me, perhaps we should look at

wallpapering it over Islington if you'd like? If you're in class this afternoon. It's easy to do." "Of course it was," she knew that had flashed through his head, "kid's stuff"—*much harder controlling the random self-replications of it, you smart aleck kid!* She winked at him. Truth was, she loved struggling with the self-awareness of those children.

"Sorry, Mzz, we've got the dentist this afternoon." She did laugh this time, and shrugged theatrically. *Who's more sorry?*

The Centre was never locked. What little they had was easy enough to stow away every night. And the rest of the place could be hosed down if required. But Rachel had arrived in reception earlier than Christy anyway. Christy could tell that she had already synched her feeder with the Centre's system, and was already busy updating something. Maybe it was her novel? It was eager, the way she worked at it, regardless. At least she had brewed the stim.

"Morning." They each said. Though that was all. Christy took a mug of drink and stepped into her draftroom, late as it was, to lay the geo-tags ahead of the day's teaching.

In the main, her day was busy but uneventful. Christy started by drawing her relationship maps, and making sure the kids were picked up by their school chaperones, heading to school. Then she got on with the more involved work of her own, taking a gun out to curate the 'hood.

Later, when the kids came back from school, she had to amuse them, and gave them her new neighbourhood maps to paste new, virtual graffiti over—why leave them only the real world to acquaint themselves with?

Stepping out of the draftroom for a moment, Christy called back over her shoulder, "And try to not to use Jessica's braid as a pull-strap, thank you." She grinned, knowing it was eclipsed by the kid's goggles.

She met with Rachel, who made some small talk, "Been a bit wild, hasn't it?" she asked. "Haven't managed a moment alone. You'll be needing a bit of a rest after this class!" Christy only smiled back.

"I wish! It's this lot, then all the parents asking their own questions!" With a nod, she rummaged about in her desk for the control widget she'd left behind—dumb piece of

steel itself, but the draftroom was programmed to respond to its kinked presence, and she was powerless in the class without it.

Coming up with the widget, she told Rachel, “Off for a cheeky break!” And Christy used the time she had given over to her assistant teacher, to slip away for a stim.

As she finished and went to return to her class—Andrew, having sent her multiple requests for assistance, *Please, give me a break, Andy!*

She heard Rachel behind her, “... if you can catch her before she’s back in class.”

Oh? So she stopped just on the corner between Centre hall and the draftroom. It wouldn’t be like Rachel to send anyone in behind her with the kids, so she figured this could be worth waiting for.

Still, it was a surprise to see Sam come round the corner.

“What the Hell! Sam?” She found herself suddenly flat against the wall as he approached. “You shouldn’t be here.” *Damn it, I should have asked Rachel to tell anyone calling that I wasn’t at home.* She muttered, “Everything was going right to plan.” At least it was as she’d understood it.

He stopped before he came to her. “I know I shouldn’t have come.”

“No. But how did you find me? I tried to be so careful.”

“I know you did.” He looked miserable as he said it. *So that’s why Rachel let him through to see me—she thinks I’m heartbroken.* “Before we got together... I had to know more about you, and I followed you home one night. Well, you came here instead. I didn’t mean to intrude, so I never said anything or let on I knew. But now I’ve had to come.”

Before blowing up the Atrium, they had agreed on what should happen if “everything went wrong.” Though in fact, that had been their intention from the start. Samanya and herself had planned on it, being on the run; on the whole Collection being blown apart. “Stay out of contact for at least three months,” she’d said, “it’s going to be hard, but if we can do that, then we can really be together.” She had meant all of it.

“We agreed that the Atrium had to be the end.” He flinched at her hiss. “It was extreme, we’d lose everyone else, but we could start again—together.”

“With Jada.”

She nodded back at him, *Yes, and with Jada.*

“You shouldn’t have come here, Sam. The more convergence there is between us, it’ll just make their job easier” —*Damn, maybe I shouldn’t be so tough on him*— “Do you need anything? I’ve got a whole survival pack here, though there’s not much in the way of comfort...”

“Mzz Cho?” it was Jenny. Christy quieted. The young girl was not foolish, however, and had obviously observed something from between the two adults, stopping her from saying more. Christy waved her on. “I’m sorry Mzz, we just wanted to tell you that we’re picking up a lot of chatter outside.” Jenny stood and looked uncomfortable. “No one knows what it says... but it looks like when we’re talking with each other in code.” Christy sucked her breath inside.

All right. Something switched on within her, a secondary system.

“Thank you, Jenny. Can you go back into the draftroom, please, and keep on with your assignment.” The girl nodded back. As she left, Christy smiled—now certain—and turned back to him. “You don’t need my help then.” Samanya looked confused by her statement.

Then he understood what she must have already known. “I didn’t want to bring them here, Chris—please—I was picked up on Friday. Out for supplies. They said they have Jada as well; if I had anyone else to give them, that they’d go easy on us all. They’re not what you think, Chris! They’re not what you—”

It was worse than she thought. “No, they’re exactly what I think they are, Sam. Trust me.”

“What are you going to do now?” He appeared so sincere. She took a deep breath, and didn’t smell the Sam she had known. The beads of sweat on his upper lip were not from exertion. It was cold fear. She saw it for the first time: his plain, borrowed clothing. He would never have chosen those for himself. The fashion gave him away. “You could still get away, Chris.” To his credit, he didn’t seem entirely against that outcome. “I don’t really know how they’re going to come for you, but maybe I could—?”

Christy shook her head. The problem was, she knew she probably could evade whoever it was. But she couldn’t. Not from here.

“I don’t want you doing any more, Sam.” She let that stand ambiguously. “This can’t be my last battle.” *Not with the children around.*

“They said they'd just take you in and ask questions. That's all they did for me, we can all still get a deal. I know it wasn't supposed to end up this way, but it's better than nothing, isn't it?”

From around the corner, away from the kids, came Rachel's voice. “No I don't think so. If you want to come barging in here and look at our system, I'll have to see a warrant. This is a Learning Centre, and I ask you to respect our rights to informatic privacy.” Christy smiled at that; what would a Librarian answer to that? But they would make the decision to move eventually, for the “greater good” and all that.

She moved. “It's alright, Rachel. I've been expecting something like this for a while.” Christy strode around the corner to face them, leaving Samanya behind her, in shock. “Do I know you?” she asked the woman, who was squared-off versus Rachel. She was built like a ballerina—short and muscular, with an unnaturally upright posture.

“I don't think so, Mzz Choinski.” They both smiled at that. “I expected you would make this difficult—for all of us.” She looked around the hall, and back toward where Samanya stood in front of the entrance to the draftroom. “This is more simple, isn't it?”

Christy nodded, “I'd rather it was.” The woman frowned. *Simpler if you'd caught me unaware and unready, huh? You've too much pride, woman.*

“Out we go then. Same with you, Mr Jalloh, you can go with the team you came with. Choinski, come with me.”

“Hold on, what the Hell is this, what are you going to—” Poor Rachel.

“Can't we go together, maybe—” and Samanya.

“Just go with it, Sam, it'll be fine. Rachel, I wanted to do the right thing, ok?” The older woman nodded, and knew to be quiet, that it was the wrong place to call anyone out. Christy looked over at Sam, and he stopped, unable to say more. As they stepped out of the Centre, she saw their blockade. There was no way this was a covert op. They must have really wanted to make an example of the Collective "Eraserheads." Funny, she'd never thought of herself as in any way in type with those restrictionists...

“Over toward the bus, thank you,” said the ballerina, just as a red double pulled-up at the stop by the end of the alleyway—though that number bus had never stopped there before... It was the only vehicle large enough for the job. Christy let herself be led away, while behind her, Samanya began to make a fuss. “Ridiculous, isn't he?” But

Christy ignored the other woman. She ignored Samanya, as well. *Best to*. She had been zip-cuffed before leaving the Centre, so she found it difficult to climb the stairs of the double decker bus—actually, more like a catamaran, the lower storey only two brackets around the roadway, suspending the passenger seating above. The woman, “Officer Maya,” as Christy was informed, helped her up the steps.

“He did help you get me,” Christy spoke in Samanya’s defence.

“And we made a deal with him for you. We’ll keep it,” agreed the other woman. Above the traffic, the bus had been retrofitted as an ops vehicle. Another three officers—she knew they weren’t actually Librarians now—*Shame on them*, she thought. Each had customary fletchettes and Tasers. *No chemical-projectiles, that’s a start*.

The bus began to move, passing the barricades that had been set up around the street. She noticed passersby watching, wondering, until they had passed away and into the general traffic.

“You know I was the ringleader, then?” she asked Maya.

“Obviously. What we don’t know is where you came from, and what your connections are. This wasn’t the only cell that was active, was it?” Of course she didn’t answer. *So they’ve got my name, but nothing else? The mystery still stands*.

“That’s why you’re taking me in.” She didn’t like where that thought went at all.

As they lurched around a corner, Christy’s razor nails—naturally long, painted in hard, clear acrylic—parted her bindings and then went straight for the first of the three guards.

Christ! she thought, *you’d think I’d taken out his eyes, not slashed the sockets*. He flew backward, not even screaming as he shielded himself. On the next, she jumped head first at his face, breaking the fine lip of bone joining the skull to the cartilage in his nose with her own forehead. “Three” screamed at that moment. And choked it on her elbow. They must have known what they were dealing with then.

Reminds me of working with Clinton... she smiled. At least as best she could. As she relaxed—after so long—into her natural combat stance, she turned to the last.

The ballerina looked stunned, and Christy thought she had gotten away with it all, until she looked down at the grenade Maya held in her fist. Trying not to juggle it on the uncertain footing of the double-decker bus.

“Don’t be mad, it’ll take us both down,” she said. Even assuming that it was a stunner.

“Don’t you think I realise that would be the only way?” Then with nothing else to be said, Maya had opened her hand, palm outward and—

Nanograph Eleven

London – Kew – One-Year Ago

The giant warehouse of the AA Project storage looked just like the one from the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark. He knew that because he'd studied media history at university. It was a weakness of his, that interest in old content. Psychologists called film—that outmoded, linear text—a “gateway media.” That’s exactly how it had been for Peter. He had become a tome raider and scalper—a minor player—in order to pay for those “appetites.” There was an artificial boom in film, tape and disk profits, and in those of bounds. Production had been curtailed; so too had property rights to the same. That was why he'd become a raider and antiquarian, feeding into his taste.

Peter knew he was just a cut-rate scalper—he'd been in too many close scraps to kid himself otherwise—but he was the one who had this secret stash. He couldn't believe his luck no one else had ever thought to raid the AA.

... Damning evidence for the Authors of it. A laugh, how much of a waste of tax the project was. Still, it was as good as a bank for him to get cash.

Course, no one wanted whatever was inside these bounds, but there were still plenty of buyers for registered spines.

Security was lax. Peter had visited so often, he had bought himself a uniform.

“Alistair.” Peter had nodded in reply to his Nom de Plume, holding up five fingers to indicate to Christopher, the black-coated guard, that he would be back out soon. The guardsman had nodded. Peter knew the guard was in the... Peter counted down on the same fingers he'd held up, the fourth day of his stim cycle. Chris tried to detox every week, to keep his addiction sharp, so he was going to be dumber than shit tonight. Brilliant.

Peter twisted the door open—the institute all so cut cost, the management had memo'd not to lock any exits; the fire safe versions were far too expensive. He entered the “secure” room.

He always got lost. Every single time he visited. It often got to the point at the end of the night he'd just grabbed whichever bounds were closest to him. He always had the best intentions to collect a particular list of titles. But no one really cared. His contacts

bought the scalped spines in bulk, on-selling to puissant dealers, who'd then cut those spines in with gray market bulk. The spines came with government indexing, so as long as no one looked closely, the new cuts appeared legal.

He turned a corner, and met another man, browsing the shelving.

The man was tall, did not appear surprised to see Peter, and scowled.

"Shhhh!" the man held his index finger to his lips. Then he laughed, "You keep quiet about this, Peter, and I'll turn a blind eye to yours'." He jerked his head down the aisle. Peter could not see the eyes under the man's glowing goggles. He stepped back from the strange man.

"What are you—" Peter remembered himself, and the uniform. Puffed himself up, "You shouldn't be in here."

The goggles stared blankly back at him, but he could figure out the scathing expression that must be held under them. "Don't be ridiculous. You go about your business, I'll do mine. No one needs to be called in, or to have their credentials read."

Peter stood still. Did he have enough—fictitious—clout to call that man's bluff? ...

Better to go back and scam old biddies of their lavender-stinking prints—no one ever thought the olds could work a new feeder, after-all. Good, solid sideline business. Peter nodded, wishing to get out of there as soon as possible.

So as Peter browsed the shelves, he tried to ignore the other—who seemed to be selecting bounds from his bag, and putting them back up onto the shelving. Working side-by-side, but as if oblivious to the other, as two men hold their cocks at a urinal.

Chapter Twelve

Graham

France – Villeneuve d’Ascq – Now

Graham was talked into it. Eventually. After Emlen had literally drawn him a diagram of what was going to happen. It was an upside down triangle—along the top line, faced Houses and the Librarians.

“You understand these two sides, but I know you don’t understand the role Agents play.” Here, Emlen completed the triangle with a third point: the Agents. “They are the danger. They’re supposed to maintain healthy competition between the Houses; to invent the very de-stability the Librarians can fill with data. That allows the Houses to build the Metatext; that supports it. If confidence in the Metatext system is lost, if new literary markets open up, and Agents go rogue, selling and re-selling their Writer’s bounds to the highest bidder...”

“I don’t understand, wouldn’t that be good?” He knew that couldn’t be right as soon as he’d said it.

“At the very least, it would destroy the Metatext—sending us back in to the wilds of a walled-garden ‘internet’; and not the free orchard of the ‘text. That’s the least of it. The Agent’s roles are taken very seriously; they’re trained in espionage and wet work. If this turns into a war over Writers, then Agents and Houses will literally be fighting in the streets and editorials. It’ll be a war with *everything* up for grabs. Librarians won’t stay out of it either, they’d break the bank to keep the Metatext free-access, that’s their *raison d’etre*.”

“Anything? That’s why you think we can walk right up to them and live?” This wasn’t exactly what he thought of as “salvation.”

“‘Enemy of my enemy,’ yes, as long as we bring them something they don’t already know, we can buy our way out of trouble.”

“How do you know for sure that they won’t kill us?”

Emlen leveled his gaze at Graham. “I know, because I’m just like them.”

“You’re a Librarian, aren’t you?”

Emlen scowled, and Graham had to believe that was enough of an answer.

They said goodbye to the French couple, and as they had waved Emlen and himself away, Graham knew how baseless their normality was. “What would happen to people like the Layfares—and to all their bounds?”

“Publishing, Writership and bounds, they each exist in a delicate equilibrium, imagine the same kind of chaos if the market for gold, or for *water* crashed. Whole national economies exist on the Metatext, and no one thinks anything of it.”

They had to walk a good few miles to the station, all the while, Graham wishing that they ran.

“You’ll have to do the talking when we get there, Graham, no one in the Library will trust me—not at first—you’ll have to convince them of the danger.” Graham nodded, he was already thinking of how. When they reached the station, it was nothing more than an upscale mall with the train a brief surprise, running behind store windows. Graham was so pre-occupied that he’d barely expressed any surprise when they found there was already an express waiting. “Be prepared, Graham, as we get in closer to their influence, they’ll bring us in—and it’ll come fast. Be ready.”

“I will.”

As they hit St Pancreas—quite literally, their bullet train never slowing till its’ hollow tip had hit the kinetic wall of the station’s power bank—it was as busy as ever. More so, it seemed, busy with day commuters coming home from France, or leaving London and heading away. Anyone could have been waiting for them.

Emlen appeared to steel himself. “I’m afraid there’s really no time to delay.” And Graham followed Emlen around the office transients and under the road, out onto Euston.

“Oh come on,” said Graham. Somehow he hadn’t seen it coming.

He’d never been there before, not even after joining the Collective, with all their absurd proclivities—it had remained one of those institutions so easy to overlook; remnant of an old empire, and thus decrepit. Useless. There were even armed guards stood either side of the high wall, as if to prove it. Graham had expected them to stay at passive attention, but one had grinned cruelly at them as the guards moved aside for the two of them. Graham thought of running. But it was much too late.

Past its gate of wrought font spelling ‘itishLibr / aryBr’ again and again in iron from over twenty feet and down, the building itself stood past a huge Red Square-like courtyard. Whose checkered red and cream flags led to the stepped-roof entrance. They passed by one ridiculous bronze statue after another, and finally up the shallow stairs to the main doorway.

“Welcome to The British Library, sirs, may I see your reading card?” The woman by the desk had a long-nosed fletch gun trained at their eyes.

“I used to have a card, first level at that...” murmured Emlen, but with that pathetic deference, her goggles had instead remained set on Graham.

“No, I’m afraid we don’t—” he froze as the gun barrel whirred and twisted like an automatic camera lens. “But we must see Justin, we have vital information for—”

“For Mr Fortesque?” and instead, she turned and focused on Emlen. “He speaks for you, too, Mr Emlen?”

“Yes he does, Natasha,” Emlen snorted softly. “Thank you for doing your best for me, I’ll try and see you don’t get into any trouble for pretending it wasn’t me.”

She laughed! “Oh, I was on watch last time you were here, they can’t demote me any further.” Graham watched as Emlen showed remorse. “I’ll call an escort for you.” And she stood there quietly. *How is she going to*—then she said, “They’ll be out soon.” Then she tried not to show any more humanity. And so they were, two black-clad officers—blond and brown—briefly scrambled to the murder hole they stood within. “Be gentle with them,” Natasha asked unprompted.

“We already have our orders,” said the blond. “Go through the scanners, sirs, we’re to take you straight through to meet with the Head.” Emlen flashed a relieved smile, and walked—still somewhat gingerly—through the vestibule doors. Graham glanced at the guards, and they gestured him through with their guns. *Ok*. He entered the Library.

It was a buzzway. The arch filled with a phosphorescent screen of highly charged particles, bouncing back and forth. He’d been through one before, at the royal reserve—though he hadn’t really seen much in the royal family that had been worth preserving. Graham took a deep breath, and stepped through. After it had catalogued his elemental makeup—the energy screen echoing what it read back to the security computer—Graham stopped on the other side and quaked as the flash-boiling of his molecules stilled.

“Christ!” Emlen was obviously shaken as well. Even their two guards were unsettled. They had bonded—all of them—ever so briefly. As they each recovered, Graham looked around. First into focus was the biggest bound that Graham had ever seen. Easily ten or twelve feet... Though it merely resolved into just another damn bronze.

Beyond the great foyer, however, bathed by skylights from above, was a five-storey glass tower, behind which were hundreds of shelves of bounds. That did not disappear. “What is that?” he whispered.

Emlen followed his gaze, and then smiled, “Oh. That’s the King’s Cache. You’ve heard of it, I’m sure?”

“I thought it was just a story.” *The hardcopy reserve of all bounds—the reality behind the books themselves?* “What is it really?” He couldn’t take his eyes off the structure. Freestanding, it took up the middle of the huge, glass ceilinged courtyard of the Library. Easily thirty feet each side, the shelves of bounds came spine first into view from within. If those bounds were all just shop bought, it could have easily been worth millions... but inside, Graham knew they were “gold standard” originals... the Fort Knox of bounds...

“It’s their power, Graham.” “Come along,” said the brown guard, and they strode diagonally across the wide floor toward a stairway off to the side. “The Library used to be one of the few deposit locations for copyright—every publisher having to provide a number of bounds of any book they’d published, in trust to the seven of them; the Bodleian was once in the number, until the Librarians there barricaded themselves away inside... It started years ago, when the Consortia—between the three: Librarians, Houses and Agents—when it was new, they argued over keeping the law, the Arts&Crafts were coming about and Houses felt they were wasting thousands of euros per edition on merely supplying the ‘Library.’ Instead they ended up making a new deal. What you see there is the Futures Market. Houses buy into the cache, using the literal bond of their bounds as notes of promise—the more luxurious a printing, the higher valuation the Writer receives for eventual trading. That’s part of the secret to why the Arts&Crafts are so beautifully made...” he trailed off.

“And your companion,” the brunette guard said to Graham, “was the only man to have ever gotten away with any of those bounds and live.”

Graham felt a ridiculous surge of jealousy—*Puts me in perspective, doesn’t it, Emlen?*

They started up a set of stairs. “I had to,” answered Emlen, “to fund my work.” The guards did not look impressed at that.

Standing at a doorway above them, Justin called and replied, “Don’t expect them to thank you, Charles. It’s their bad job you’re mocking, after all.” Graham missed the guard’s reactions, too shocked at seeing Justin again, so close and so soon. He almost leapt forward on top of him. Except he felt one arm held by blond, and the other grasped by Emlen.

Justin stopped speaking. Then nodded, “Yes. I owe you an apology, Graham, you didn’t have to see how that had to end.”

“Didn’t have to see? Is that all you have to say?” Graham saw the spray of his own question. Felt the foam of his anger settle on his lips.

“He was already dead. No greater death for a Writer than obscurity. I’m sorry I

said anything at all, but I do regret involving you.”

Emlen kept a—surprisingly gentle—hold of Graham’s arm. “Stop it,” he said, “It’s done. This won’t help Nicolas now.”

“And you, Charles, why have you come?” Justin turned his attention to Emlen.

Emlen was silent. Graham answered, “We were—I was looking for a bound of my book. For the real thing.”

Justin still watched Emlen. “That’s what this has been? You’re selling your services to the public now? That is a bit pathetic, isn’t it?” No one attempted to respond.

Graham said, “He found me, I didn’t know where to look, and he wanted to be paid by my own expertise.” That’s what they had rehearsed.

“The expertise you displayed working for that ‘Collective’ of yours? Of course he did,” Justin laughed.

“Well I didn’t see your people picking them up, nor the trail of their patron, either,” Emlen was scathing.

“Not without the skills of our best bibliometricist, no!” The two of them tried staring each other down. Neither of them gave way.

Graham broke their stalemate, “Damn it. That’s the point, Mr Fortesque.” And Justin looked back on Graham. “It got tight, but we found a copy after all—after we escaped from you on Rhodes.” Justin’s face soured further. “We got it, ok? I was just happy to have my own copy, but Emlen couldn’t figure out why it was someone would have gone to the trouble of ruining my text—shit, it *was* done on purpose! All right? But why? And I still had Nicolas’ bound...”

“Justin, please listen, I cracked it! One of the bounds wouldn’t have been enough, but with two I could compare and crack the code they’ve been using to hide them all. Listen, if these two bounds are, as I fear, merely the start of a plan to destabilise publishing...”

Justin waved, “Oh, we know the threat Emlen.” He looked blank.

“Then why?” began Emlen. Then burst out laughing. “Oh! You needed me to lead you to the culprit. That’s why you were there on Rhodes.”

“Yes. We knew you were interested in this ‘Graham,’ but not actually why. We were going through him and trying to get in contact with you.”

“So how do we begin?” Emlen finally spoke directly to Justin, waiting for his answer.

Justin decided—he showed just as much choice as Graham felt. “I have just the thing. Follow me.” They were still on the stairs, and Justin pushed down between them and led back to the floor. “We’ve recently acquired new intel regarding the whereabouts of the enemy. There have been rumours for some time of a rogue working via the Ransom networks, but this is the closest we’ve yet come.”

“Look, I don’t understand what this ‘rogue’ is about—if you already knew, what are you going to do with us now?”

The head librarian merely glanced past Graham and continued across the floor.

“Justin is talking about a black library, Graham. There are countless unregistered collections of bounds, much like your own—whole catalogues of them—however, a collection designated as ‘black’ would be a true informatic sinkhole. There must be no meta-record of the bounds at all. We still find blacks in out of the way corners of the globe, as historical anomalies. However, if this is correct?” Justin nodded. “If my theory is correct, then this would be the first black of the information age. A secret library of such a scale would damage confidence in the ‘text—that’s more than just a theoretical threat, once some go offline with their data, then more and more will. It would be a crash like in the stock market of the nineteen-thirties, or of the early millennium. But this time, the entirety of world culture crashes with it.

“A Ransomed collection, using my hacking protocols, cobbled together with your own work, and with those of poor fools like Nicolas,” he didn’t stop in consideration, “tools used to permanently sever the tenacious tissue of creative metadata. It’s been almost unthinkable before now, even monstrous, but still theoretically possible.”

His own hacking methods? ... I thought that was a slip when he said it before...

Graham looked from Emlen, over to Justin. What was going on?

But the two professionals both appeared shaken. “Quite right. And what we want of you,” Justin was stopped before a closed doorway labeled “Reading Room.” “We want you to recover, or to recreate, that metadata—we must know what has been taken from us. If nothing else. Recover it, and tell us how it was done.” He signed in to the security door.

The room that stretched out in front of them was semi-spherical, perhaps three hundred feet in diameter, and chalk white where it was not walled in glass—behind which windows, thousands of automated claws rearranged bounds by the tens of thousands. Librarians, each wearing whiskered goggles much like Emlen’s own, stood, apparently randomly, about the room.

Emlen watched for Graham’s response. “Brilliant, isn’t it? This is just one of the workrooms, and from here, any one of the bounds in the collection can be recalled. Justin, do you have a pair of glasses for him to try?”

“Oh? Yes, of course! It is rather impressive, isn’t it?” He waved one of the officers, who still bracketed them, to find him a pair.

Graham watched as a young Librarian, in the uniform micro-tweed they all seemed to wear, swung her head back and forth.

“Truthfully speaking, these Librarians are merely purveyors of metadata, they’re relationship mining here, connections which will be sold on to the Houses.”

“For the status quo?”

Justin shook his head violently, “What has he been telling you? Our work is the basis for the future of Humanity, countless billions of ideas, connections between science and art, society and economics, thoughts that couldn’t have been dreamt of without our ‘dirty’ dealings. Is that it, Charles?”

Emlen nodded, “That may have been what I called it.” Instead of having that argument, however, he manfully waved it off and received the glasses returned, meant

for Graham. “Here, let me fit them for you.” They were thick-rimmed, geek-chic glasses, mirrored and not unlike Emlen’s. Except that the whiskers on these bristled out freely like antennae. As they slipped on, held by a band around his head and not with legs, lights in the frames flashed into his eyes. When he flinched, Emlen explained, “They’re just calibrating.”

Graham nodded. Then was inside the... “*Metaquarium?*”

“Let them initiate...” said Emlen. So he watched as countless targeting circles blinked on and off. They appeared at random, swimming in side from side, until he realised that each ringed an individual bound he could see in the room. As he thought of that, his eyes following a bound being drawn off in a claw, the target matched to it. As he tried to read the title, the bulls-eyes flashed, congregating around the speeding edition.

“What?...” he tried, before the lenses snapped-to and zoomed hundreds of times closer, bringing the title *Anthropomorphic Personifications* into stark relief. As he read it, related information scrolled up his periphery. But before he could refocus, blazing lines of neon shot in from beyond his sight, at the bound, from all directions and he physically recoiled.

The zoom matched him, withdrawing to show the lines joining the still moving bound with many others. Foot still raised while his eyes jumped between them, titles popped; *Gods of...*, *African Technological Reinter...*, *Teleological...* and hundreds more. His foot fell backward.

Lines coalesced. More data. Staggered again. Between steps, the neon connections blurred into almost fractal patterns, each describing an intertextuality as if they joined all possible bounds—which then condensed in to sharp references as his foot came down again. And again—hyper-text—as Graham stumbled and tried to make sense of it all.

“Christ!” He tore the glasses from his face. “What the hell was that?” He swallowed, feeling as if he wanted to throw up.

The two Librarians laughed at him, “That, Graham, is the way I see the world. The glasses match the depth of your gaze and feed you relationships. Whatever you can see

is cross-referenced and filtered by the way you look through it. The Library uses the full collection of bounds to promote synchronicity. Recreating the experience of browsing, otherwise lost via the Metatext. It allows you to mine for possible relationships between texts.”

“The neon then?...”

“Graphical network, relating all the Metatext.”

“Put them back on, Mr Nutt, you’ll need them to access the lower levels of the building.” Graham saw Justin had fitted his own, horn-rimmed glasses.

“There are no paths you see, Graham. The lower levels are a subject maze—designed to repel intruders. You’ll see, just follow me, and look out for whatever I call.” Emlen winked, and pulled the goggles up over his eyes from where they hung around his neck. “Come.”

Graham pulled his own set back down over his forehead, trying to focus on the back of Emlen’s head. The data that appeared around him merely repeated “REDACTED” over and over. At least—for Graham’s stomach—there were very few neon spikes reaching out from his centre. Enough, however, they still sketched a disco-style tunnel right around the dark heart of Emlen’s soul. “Shit!” He followed as quickly as he could, stumbling along behind the Librarians.

Halfway across the large room, he noticed something strange, the iconography in the glasses began matching the lean and sway of his stride. Different bounds lit, drawing his attention and stabilised his walk. “Weird shit,” he murmured.

Past a nondescript access way and down bare ‘crete stairs. Out in to a plant room stretching at least double the size of the reading room above.

“Circulation central!” shouted Justin over the din.

Crates of bounds, preciously swaddled in egg-crate padding hurtled along rails, not unlike an automated ammunition handling system Graham had once seen in an army supply doco. No hands touched the product, the warehouse having that hush that only comes of thundering machinery.

“Heading to the low-oxy facility,” explained Justin. “It’s like a Moon-base down there you know—was it in operation when you were here, Charles?” Emlen shook his head. “Shame. Still, the excavation never ends... we’ve increased to over twenty-one miles of deposits per year now, recently clinched a deal for the chalk mine in Emmer Green.” He looked at Emlen triumphantly.

“You can’t be serious! You have permission to go ahead with that insane scheme?”

“No, not yet...” He looked at Graham, explaining in subvocalised text through the glasses, “We have bounds that are simply beyond the remit of our science to repair. There have been a number of suggested solutions,” he gestured to Emlen, “But the one I’ve always championed was to irradiate them for storage in chalk, and leave them for future generations to solve. Closest we can come to putting them in true status.” Graham didn’t know what to say to that. “Just one of the many disagreements your ‘friend’ and I had, Mr Nutt.”

He watched a train of teenage vampire romances go by. Through his glasses, they each referred back to the same source materials.

“We’ll soon be heading into our semantic maze, so be prepared, Mr Nutt.” Justin cracked, then hauled open a huge, insulated door.

They headed through the revealed blast tunnel, where bounds were being “prepped” for freezing and long-term storage.

Halfway along they came to a nondescript entrance. “Down we go into Wonka’s own psychedelic nightmare of referencing...” Justin looked puzzled for a moment at Emlen’s phrase, then shrugged and opened the door. Emlen took hold of Graham’s arm, “Remember what I told you, and look for whatever I call out to you.” Behind the door, nothing, just a narrow turnstile door, blacked-out, set to admit only one at a time.

“Aw, come on... Emlen?”

But he had already followed Justin through, and Graham stood alone. “What the fuck is this?” He had often thought that secret societies must have a childish mentality.

But machine gun toting librarians and their secret clubhouse? “Damn it.” He stepped over to the blackened doorway and pushed through.

And stepped into a hall of mirrors. He almost stumbled into Emlen, who stood waiting by the entrance. “Thanks for finally joining me. We have to go together, or the maze will reset. We both told you it’s a ‘subject’ maze, a ‘semantic’ trap. What we meant is that once we start walking it, the mirrors will show us many subjects and titles, it’ll be up to me to do a language and facet analysis of them all. When I call out my result, find that in the mirrors and focus. Your glasses are the key, if they don’t reflect the correct interrelationships, then you’ll never get out. Stay very close.” Then he let go, and as he did the mirrors flashed into a collage of images and catalogue entries.

The images were suddenly ringed by thousands of overlapping targets, each of them sketching neon threads between each other. And, *Oh god! Feedback between the same images, mirrors oscillating the topics into infinity...* Emlen spoke at his side, “All right... so the field is... and if, so... not... it’s ‘baseball,’ Graham. Graham, follow me.” He couldn’t. The images and texts were not so much mesmerising—as paradigmatically vertiginous. Graham felt as if he stood on the top of a precarious tower of concepts...

Until, “It’s a story, Graham, the development of the sport through immigrant assimilation.” He saw that. It was still a tangled mess of relationships, but he found the pattern. As he did, the neon links revolved like in a kaleidoscope, revealing a tunnel of bare mirror.

“Through here!” They ran. Into another mess. Now that he was thinking in narrative, however, he found it easier to unlock the new situation. Ultimately describing the flavours of coffee. And more and more and—

“Finally. Charles, I do believe you’re losing your touch,” said Justin, waiting by a blessedly clear mirror-wall.

“It’s been a while since I practiced wasting my time like that,” replied Emlen. The mirrors now reflected nothing except a clean, white room.

“Regardless, you’ve both joined me now. Suffice to say, Mr Nutt, if you repeat anything you learn down here, you will be killed.”

Graham nodded, *That was already my assumption.*

Justin nodded and signed into the security, leading them through the vault door. “You’ll remember most of this, Charles, our datarooms and vaults... yes, you would... there have been some changes, however. Over there—” Pointing at a locked wing, “We have R&D, developing new systems for post-coordinate indexing. The new advances in quantum computing are making it somewhat—scarily, in fact—like prophecy. Human-aided of course.”

“Well of course. Why would the Houses need you if they could implement their own programme?” Emlen smirked.

“Nice to see you’re still with us in some ways,” Justin smiled along with him. “Still the same training facilities, though we had to buy an unused Tube line for the ballistics expansion. And here,” the room he’d led them to was only ten by ten, most of that surrounded by limp hazmat suits. In the centre of the floor, there was a wheel-locked valve. “Down into the dungeons of the Library. See, Charles? We finally found a use for the drainage sump. Put these suits on while the tunnels flush.”

Graham had never worn anything like that suit. Silk-smooth and tightly clinging. As he pulled the plexi helm over his head and settled it, Emlen came over to check his safety systems.

Over the in-built radio Emlen said, “We have to cycle the air out, checking for leaks—it may feel as if your lungs are being sucked-out through your sinuses—then we’ll switch to internal supply. Ok?” Graham didn’t think to reply before Emlen reached and pulled an evac cord on his shoulder, and yes—he thought, *Emlen’s going to kill me!* His lungs collapsed, dragging his chest in under its own gravity. The cage of it cracked as the blood behind his eyes sparked like two live wires, Emlen let go of the cord and dashed his fist against the left breast of the suit. Atmosphere flooded back in. The punch may well have re-started his heart.

He would have sworn, but even his brain was out of breath.

While he recovered, Justin donned his own suit and then twisted the cover in the middle of the floor open, revealing a manhole.

The other two men went first, but waited for Graham to meet them below. The ladder rungs were slick in the glove's grip. Nothing fancy down there, only dripping 'crete tunnels stretching into the compass directions, half a floor height—five foot. They each hunched.

Justin in his Day-Glo orange suit took the passage to the left. "The drainage tanks are still mostly intact, we only reclaimed this set of tunnels," he said as they shuffled past portholes set into iron pressure-ways. "We needed a place to put dangerous dissidents, you remember?" Graham began to have a very bad feeling about it all. *Surely they wouldn't?*

Then they stopped at a door: "Number nineteen." "Look inside," he said.

Emlen ducked further and peered through the scum-streaked glass. "Mmmhmm," he said. "Graham?" Moving to the side, allowing him to press closer.

Graham squinted through the slick green glass. *Wait.* "Bun?" he asked. She was in the cell, obviously unaware she was being watched.

Justin rounded on him. "What do you mean?" Emlen was not much slower, only constrained in turning on him by the low headroom of the tunnel.

"Oh," he blushed under his helmet, realising what it was he had said, "I'm sorry, it's just I think I recognise her."

"Of course you do," Justin scoffed. "'Christine Choinski' was a member of your ill-fated Collective." He turned to Emlen, once more as if Graham wasn't there. "We picked her up along with a number of others you hadn't gotten to. Since then, we've had her here under containment and we've been questioning her. She had a great deal to say, suspicions of her own regarding the source of their funds. Even maps of possible hot sites of activity. Given her background, however, we've decided to keep her here under observation for a little longer..."

"Wait, you think our Collective has a connection to this 'black library' you're talking about?"

"Yes, Mr Nutt, this problem appears to go very deep indeed..."

Nanograph Twelve

London – In-Hiding – One-Year Ago

When the Agents had caught him unaware at the Retreat in the Caribbean, Robin had laughed at them. ... Well, he had started to laugh. He hadn't managed to finish the breath.

If they'd caught him five minutes later, the job would have been complete and maybe things would have been different. His employer might have had mercy on him.

Instead, they struck him and stuck him with the burn.

When he'd woken, his fingertips had been numb. Badly enough that he had cracked the screen of his feeder, frantically trying to push through the capacitive buttons. Trying to call his contact.

"Why are you calling?" the man had asked Robin on picking up. "You were caught."

"It was almost done. I got them the Narrative. I think the 'event' went through."

"And the data?" Robin had been told to delete it all, "Better to be safe than sorry," were the precise words, intoned rather miserably.

"... No," said Robin. That's when it had happened and the Agents had come.

"Well. I can work with that. But it wasn't done, and I owe you nothing. Do not call again." And the screen went dark around the cracks.

Robin had funds, of course. Though that hadn't made him any friends. The game was a calling and only another player would have understood. The problem was, that they did. All too well. It was difficult to get close to a competitor. As he sat in his rented hole—he'd been dropped halfway round the world and still suffered with jetlag, or rendition-sickness, or both—his hands shook. He'd never met anyone who'd been burnt. Hadn't ever wanted to.

Robin thought he hadn't been the only 'setter on jobs like these... his other contacts had always been for Houses, outsourcing their dirty work. The run at the Retreat had been different, had a bit more of an "art" about it. It was in another echelon entirely.

So Robin started tracing his employer. His ex-employer. The very worst thing a

professional could do. But then, he wasn't a professional anymore.

And it was big. He traced the man from Retreat to Retreat—presumably for the Ransoms that were rumoured to have happened at those same times. However, whenever Robin tried to contact the men behind the exchanges, he had been locked out. No one wanted to be faced with the wreck of him. Those other men called themselves “artistes” and their fear was strong. Damn fucking right it should be! What else did he have to offer, but a miserable, inevitable end?

But it was impossible to get ahead of the man, there was nothing on him—as if he never existed—except in past tense. How many places had his goggled employer been?

Chapter Thirteen

Christy

London – Unknown Location – Now

Christy wasn't sure what she could do. She had woken two or three days before, ears still ringing from the concussion blast. *Crazy, crazy!* She still repeated that to herself, but wasn't really sure what she meant by it. *Crazy.* She was given expert medical attention, but had been locked in the same 'crete cell all along. The small room, ten by ten and five, hurt her eyes; it had no corners, and precious few flat spaces. The render that flowed round its numerous pipes and valves softened every hard edge. It was obviously not built as a prison originally. She knew where she was. In the bowels of the British Library. The dungeons that other Agents had sometimes spoken of...

After they'd stabilised her from the grenade, they began torturing her in earnest. Christy knew she couldn't beat them at that game—after all, these Librarians had trained her, had trained the best Agents in the business. When they'd come, the two middle-aged men crowding her cell and the one chair within it, each wearing their Archivist's gloves... she had been prepared to hold back for as long as she could—at the very least, she owed Clinton not to reveal his role in her defection. Instead, as they stood around her, they asked her about the Collective.

She would never have thought the Library would be interested in their Collective—*Surely it was all too smalltime for them?* While she'd known there was danger in attracting attention by blowing the Atrium, that was merely their being inflammatory. A martial issue, not literary. Still, they wanted to know about it, and Christy began to wonder if her suspicions regarding the secret powers behind the Collective were true.

So, with no love lost between her and the shadow-master of the Collective, she offered-up anything they might have wanted. She gave them drop-names, dates and accounts, and she saw they were most excited when she had sites to give them.

Ultimately, however, that was not enough. Christy was still held and didn't know if

she would ever be released. She had known that it was never going to be enough. They weren't ever going to let her get away again.

Christy remembered how she had escaped a year ago with Clinton's help.

The end had started as she walked up score after score of steps, leading to her job. *This is the last time.* The man she was targeting opened the door to her when she knocked, and gasped as Christy jumped in, taking him tumbling with her. Twisting him prone. Taken control from him immediately—A “*secure apartment,*” that was still a laugh to her. He was thrown backward into his own home by her sleek, ur-leathered attack.

She threw her hair back and looked down at him. “Keep low and this will be brief.”

That one time, they had offered the idiot typesetter a job. A step up onto the corporate ladder; parallel rungs, at least, into the shadows of espionage. Christy had seen the accounts working on him, when he had still been in the black of the balance sheet, and the House hadn't wanted to waste him. Actually, she'd argued for him herself—even though she had only been brought in by courtesy, because he'd been playing with the prints under her control. “Give him a chance.” The House gave his chance to her.

Christy kept an eye on him after that. Cachet had been her responsibility. She watched him as he spent a couple of years working as a double between two publishing Houses. And watched over him when he was cut adrift.

He should have disappeared that time...

After the last time she met him, on a beach in Perth. Then Christy had called on Clinton.

He hadn't wanted to work with her. But then, she hadn't given him much choice.

“I found out what you did for that lowly jockey, Clinton, when I shook him down.” Turned out Clinton had been the fence for Cachet's stolen bounds. The coincidence had been incredible, who would have guessed her data miner would have been the same man who'd been aiding and abetting the targets? “So at least I can trust that you don't wipe your jobs when they're done.” She presumed that had been the intention anyway—to let the other man live.

“I’m not that kind of man.” He was incensed at that. “If I give you my word, I’ll stick with it, but I don’t like being blackmailed.”

“Perfect. That’s what I want, someone with principles. I’m not going to turn you in either, I just want out.”

He stopped shaking in her grasp. “Are you serious? Once you’re out, there’s no going back.”

“You think I don’t know that? This isn’t what I wanted when I joined up, Clinton. I knew it wasn’t a nice business, but I’m not going to do any wet works for them again.”

“Can’t you just retire?” Freed from her grasp, Clinton scratched the bridge of his nose, under the pinch of his glasses.

“You don’t retire, you have to disappear.”

“So the plan is to break *into* the House, erase your contract and then get back out again? And you need me to do the erasure.”

She nodded, “That’s about it. I’ll get us in, you do the job and if it all goes to plan, we get to walk right out scot-free.”

So that was how the two of them had ended-up, knee-deep in retardant foam, with three assailants on top of them.

“Aikido on frictionless surfaces...” said Christy, “this is new.” But Clinton was far too preoccupied with re-routing the lockdown security systems to watch her glide between centrifugal tough men. “‘Carnage on Ice’?” she offered. Forced on him.

“Please!” he replied. “Let me work.” So she had. It wasn’t that her opponents weren’t well trained, only that they’d mainly trained on security systems—not people. A system that Clinton had mistakenly taken offline minutes before. Of course, the computer interpreted the security grid going offline as being from only one possible thing; massive environmental catastrophe—it simply wasn’t an integrity breach, that couldn’t happen. Thus the fire retardant.

Her elbow spasmed into the last guard’s face, in a move her sensei had inexplicably named the “funky chicken.” “Letting you ‘work,’ was my mistake to begin with, Clinton,” but she hadn’t really meant that. The two of them were in it much too deeply by then. They were committing true industrial espionage. “Ok, as long as we’re done in the next... thirty seconds or so... we can get by on the chaos of the evac. I’ll

time you.” She beeped her cuff. He looked up at her, dashing out another few keystrokes from memory. She had smiled serenely, he had returned to work.

“There are whole loads of associates held by you, what’s going to happen to them? It could turn in to a bloodbath, everyone trying to scoop up those Writers,” Clinton said.

“I arranged continuity for them. I’ve passed on their keys, and their new Agents’ll contact them in time. As long as I stay out of their futures—as you said, once I’m out, there shouldn’t be any going back. I can’t keep this up much longer, it isn’t what I wanted. I just like stories...”

Clinton stopped once again, looking up at her in sympathy. “It’s done.”

They had in fact simply walked out of the building—having hidden the three bodies under the blanket of foam. The House had once been located in a fashionable brownstone in New York, but since relocated to New Zealand, as just another tax break. It was a low building in the “light services” park, bracketed by the PINC building, and a rather mysterious, black monolith of a structure. Her fingertips had been buzzing off and on for miles from the site, twisting in the quasar-like, narrowcast emergency updates that spiked from the massive lump of the House.

“Do you think we’ll get away with that?” she had finally asked, sitting in one of the newly resurgent tearooms.

He shrugged when she’d asked if they should split up. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” and sipped his tea.

Slipping back into consciousness, she thought that it could have been hours later? Minutes? Days? Abruptly, she realised that she couldn’t have been wholly comatose, as she felt the tender tug of the blanket draping her, as the Archivist in her gloves, tucked Christy’s blanket back.

“That’s all right dear, we’re done now, you can sleep.” God, what had she told them?

But it was too much and she slipped away again...

Christy just loved stories. Though she'd never been able to tell any herself. Instead she

was an instigator—her earliest memory, one of blackmailing her younger sister to write for her. Not that Nicola was unable to hold her own, she had written texts with the intent to stop abruptly—then never to return or end it. Those cliffhangers had driven Christy wild. Though perhaps things may have been different if her sister hadn't died. Her parents never really recovered from that. And never handled Christy again, passing her off from one new school to another.

Once she'd been moved around so many different schools, her modus op had changed.

Lloyd was her first, in early middle school, he showed a shy proclivity for telling tales, and she had arranged it so he had to write them. It'd been cruel, of course she knew that since, arranging bullying to force him to do the writing. Turning his whole class against him. Mocking his creativity until he had to prove himself.

Circling him, teasing him, “What're you writing now, Lloyd” —pronounced like some kind of cartoon “lord” —“You making any friends on the ‘text? Do they like you, do they watch you write for them?” It'd never really impacted on her, though she learned to appreciate what she had done later. The fact was, Christy never fit in to any of her schools, with none of the kids, and was moved round to another before she learnt any false empathy.

The irony of her later becoming a teacher was not lost upon her.

Lloyd was the first, but far from the last. The House had recruited her from the fifth of her dead end high schools, after she'd gamed another girl for her IP—contracting for her performance on the ‘text. That would have been fine, she knew now, except that it'd gone global, breaking many of the House's free-time agreements. Christy had no idea that the Houses and Agents each bid for time zone minutes as they used to buy bandwidth. By then Christy had tamed a whole phalanx of Writers, leading their local brand. Though only by her brute effort. That was not acceptable.

She might have been renditioned, taken away for processing in New York—and coming from Cardiff, who would have cared? Agents tended to be rather territorial. But there was always someone from the Houses watching for new talent. In fact, that's

where she had come in for years afterward.

As streamlined as the Houses had become—they were still labouring giants. Instead, they used fleet Agents to source the talent, though that would mean having to negotiate with individuals who were often little better than well-trained psychos. *Yes*, she recognised that in herself too. *Just as well*.

Houses then fostered potential Agents with the Librarians for training, to make a better tool for finding Writers.

“While you’re here with us,” said her trainer Luka, an older Librarian, “You will do as we say. Once the House takes you back for their own round of training, you can hate them instead. It’s in your future to be both our nemeses, so you better start building your resentment now.” She hadn’t been joking. Christy saw later that the peculiar line came straight from the manual. “Now... *en avant-garde!*”

They crammed theory, marksmanship and critique—amongst other dangers—into her head, teaching her to be sharply, critically discerning. They read and talked, learned about digital preservation and how best to kill a man without damaging his literature or bounds.

She loved it in the Library. But House Hatchet had come back for her, taking her away to teach her their own skills.

So here I am once again. The Library. Last place I wanted to be. Hatchet had been so easy to escape, but they were never really the true danger. The Houses, quite explicitly, never had the skill to track her... that’s why the world still needed Librarians.

Christy was aware of the three men watching her through the porthole. She couldn't have missed it, as the grinding sound of the flush pumps only sounded when there were visitors. In fact, she had been waiting for it—it took all the control she had left not to twitch under their gaze. There would come a moment when all her observers wanted to do was to run—from her; from the cell—that was when it would have to happen.

At the very least, the Archivists were skilled at a torture that left no lasting scars, so while she ached, quaked and would likely suffer a lifetime of anxiety over latex and cotton wool buds, she was still perfectly capable. She hobbled to the door, having slipped the ties that'd held her to the chair. She took as few controlled steps as was possible. When she came to the end of her cell, Christy reached her hands, outstretched toward the blank vault door. Close, closer, till they *snicked* and pulled the ten digits of her hands tight against its surface. Her fingertips pinched between steel and unseen magical force. Nothing to see here. Not on the inside of the cell.

When she'd had the magnets implanted, it was standard practice just to have the two of them, one for each ring finger; Christy wanted otherwise, twenty in all, in each finger and toe.

“You won't be able to scale buildings, if that's what you're thinking, Mzz. The magnets could hold if you turned up the power, but the flesh of your fingers wouldn't.” *Right*, she'd thought, *It's going to take practice for that*. Practice to beat the physics modeling of the manufacturers... who had been more than right. She lived weeks with the humiliating bruises upon each finger to prove it. Though Christy had in fact managed to perform some stunning party tricks, the once telemagnetically juggling three small steel ball bearings. Except that'd only been in strictest private; until her defection and meeting Rachel, she really had few friends. Certainly none she'd been willing to give trade secrets for.

... *Yes*... running her fingertips along the inside of the door, she felt the telltale wriggle of the magnets as they passed over the internal tumblers of the combination lock. Christy was trained in safe-cracking, that was one of the more brute systems that Hatched had been so good at. And even that skill would have normally proven useless on the inside of a prison. Except for her ten, tiny little surprises. She turned up the power—directly from her bone marrow into the micro-dots. Pushing her head close, she worked, slowly manipulating the turning of the lock's internals from where she was trapped.

Christy worked as quickly as she dared—at a game of Jenga in the dark. Still, it was pleasingly fast, until—she felt a sharp crack inside her left indexer. The magnet overloaded, fracturing out of its shell. It was nothing more than a brief electric shock,

but her other fingers trembled as they were drawn after the falling tumbler. “Damn,” she said. She knew the magnet would eventually reform beneath the surface of the skin—that’s what they *did*—it was time she had against her.

Ultimately, it helped that the vault was optimised to work under a pressure of five-hundred psi. The hatch quite literally sucked free of its seal, popping an inch out into the aquifer tunnel. Without a scratch upon it. “Figure that one out, sensei,” she chuckled and pushed.

The rot smell of a swimming pool change room hit her as she cracked the bulk door. No wonder the Archivists had come in hazmats, first spraying her cell down with a fine bleach and the same on their departure. It looked ever so much like the Tube to her—oh, not the plebeian Underground, but the Cold War surplus shadow-Tube they used for publishing. It should have been the stunning oil-bow of hidden fungus, except that the emergency evac lights bathed all in red.

As she turned her head, she saw the next bulkhead along had already been sealed and flooded. Hers’ was next. Which way had her interrogators gone? *Not through the flood, anyway*, not that it really mattered, she had no choice. Christy ran.

An upshot of her being small and shoeless: she fit freely in the tunnel. It only took her to duck her head and bowl along the tunnel, where others would have shuffled.

While the sub-dungeon must only be a mile of shelving, total, it branched at every ten feet. As she ran, she noted the damp puddle at her feet swell by an inch, *That’s the primer*, she knew, *before the locks break*—

It was sudden when it came. The shock of the water’s impact stunned her; in fright, Christy foolishly swallowed her last gulp of oxygen. The water swirled in from all directions, whilst she was the corkscrew held immobile, the bottle twisting closed around her. Tightly.

As she reviewed her situation, she thought... *And that’s the worst case of indigestion I’ve ever had*, with the tight bubble inside her an uncomfortable ball. She wondered what her options were. Until she realised that she was deep underground, an unknown prisoner, flooded in an evac tunnel, with her last sense of up and down shot by

her popped ears. Sparks of red light dashed all around her—tiny bubbles refracting the drowned evac lights. There was no more time.

Then she scrambled. Freely. Madly. Until her left foot connected, twisting and throwing her shoulder awkwardly at the ceiling—or against the floor. It hurt. It was dumb. She floated, presuming her shoulder was dislocated. Spent her agony, twisting her body. Was still.

Calmly, *All right, now we're getting somewhere.* She thought, and formed a plan.

Christy then regurgitated the air in her stomach up into her mouth, savouring the false lungful for a long moment. Finally, Christy blew one soft, perfect bubble. It formed in front of her face, then pulled away. She followed the last of her breath as it wobbled, caught and twisted in an invisible vertex, drawing herself after it toward the withdrawn air.

The bubble tried to keep its Platonic shape, but was dragged out like a rope between the swirling currents. A rope that Christy swallowed along behind.

To a hatch in the ceiling. Thankfully, a hatch made with a simple turning valve.

She popped free—bobbed bonelessly—up into a white clean room. It was difficult for her to breathe, but she soldiered on. Finally, Christy managed to scissor herself out of the hatchway, legs and good shoulder squeezing her up and out. Excruciating. She blacked out for a moment.

Christy came to. “Where the hell? ...” and remembered, “Oh wow...” She stood, arm trailing uselessly. It took her a number of tries to relocate her shoulder; the first few strikes of it against the clean wall were too ginger—and made a disproportionate agony for their hesitation. “Fuuuck!” she growled at herself in low, dog-language. That last did it, but would probably have left scarring on the tendons. Once she recovered from that, she looked around her new cell.

“Repairs room, by the look of it.” Hung with hazmats and tool belts. She kept talking to herself, holding on to her consciousness, “I can use that, sure.” Stripping off her soaked, foul-smelling clothing, she pulled on an under-smock and a discarded white

coat. “Tools: steel cord and restraints, multi-tool, ... laser torch. Nice.” She left behind the breathing masks, trying not to think of the noxious soup of gasses she had been sucking on below. “Now, what to do? Escape a high security compound, from below the middle of London, through an army of trained killers...” She took a deep breath through her stiffening breast, “I can do that.”

“I can do that,” she repeated, as she stuck her head around the doorway, through to the base. “I can.” It was possible for an Agent of her level. Though not likely. “I can do that. I can.” Another part of her thought, *If I'm not just shot by the first clerk I see*—thankfully, that part of her was concussed. “I can do that,” she said, and stepped out into the corridor. She had a hair net over her wet hair, a clean coat over her bruised body, but no glasses to fit in with any zombie Librarians she might meet. Thankfully, by gurning her tattooed face, she knew she could induce static in their AR, while their glasses tried vainly to match her on the database.

The retina scanner was no problem for her—not since her laser eye re-mapping. And she only had to strike one confused Librarian on her way through. Who was a more than adequate shield as she held him, puppet, between herself and another small group, coming back in from lunch. They waved at him in recognition, but ignored her.

She waited for them to pass before stashing the man by an unused desk near the entrance. *Shame, if I'd left him conscious, I could have used him as a hostage.* She frowned, and looked out the small view port in the external door. It led into the main foyer, as she knew every single exit must.

Three men stood in her view. Now, that wasn't likely, was it? *What the hell is Graham doing here? And free?* Worse, she had recognised Justin from behind. He had only been a sub-director when she was being trained, but she knew he'd assumed the top job since. The third man she didn't recognise, but he read like a Librarian.

Christy cracked the door regardless. “I can do that,” she said for the final time.

She heard Justin say, “We realised that bond was the best way to preserve knowledge.” Justin actually laughed at that. “Hundreds of years of R&D and the control experiment was conclusive.” He forestalled Emlen, “Yes, precisely what you argued,

Charles—don't think that you were the first, however—”

He stopped speaking as Christy placed the laser torch to the back of his head. Graham recoiled—but was none of her concern—she tried to keep both Justin and the other man in sight, but the third merely raised his brows from beneath his glasses.

“Ah,” Justin said, “Christine Choinski, counter-espionage Agent.” How he recognised her, she could not know. As he faced away and watched the other two of them through his AR glasses, she stayed carefully in what would have been his own neon umbra. “She was with your group, Mr Nutt. And you probably know Charles Emlen,” Justin continued, as if introducing them all.

“Please, Christine, you're surrounded. You're hurt—I can tell by the tremor in the nuzzle of your... is that a repair torch?”

Ok, how the hell could he know that? “The blade would go straight through your head, Mr Fortesque.”

“It ‘would,’ yes. But it won't.” How could he be so sure? “What did you think the Archivists were doing with you? We've long had our eye on you, Christine, and now we've had the time to interrogate your persona. You are not willing to kill me.” Christy felt like laughing. This is where it had all led?

The other man, Charles, seemed rather blasé as he looked at her, with her hand still holding the torch. “You were behind those amateurs?” he asked, flicking his glance toward Graham.

Dammit! “And who the hell are you?” she said, rounding properly upon him. Losing the aim of her torch. *It was a good go.* Maybe she could blast him instead?

Justin stopped her before she put the torch on him—perhaps his hand was also for the Officers she now saw were posted around them. “Christine. This is Charles Emlen, our ronin—now perhaps, our prodigal son?” He stopped, appeared to wait for some response—whether from herself, or from Charles—until she broke her courage and shook her head. “Well, perhaps you never interacted. He got away with over ten bounds from the cache itself.” Well then, she felt impressed despite herself. “Anyway, we were

expecting you.” He seemed to relent for her. “Well, it wasn’t actually very likely you would get quite this far by yourself, but given that eventuality... yes, we rather hoped we would meet you now.”

“You can’t have expected me to escape.”

“No, but if you had—and you did—then you would be the perfect individual for the mission.” She held on, cold. “Christine, the Library wants you to lead these two men against the head of your erstwhile ‘Collective.’ You were right to have anticipated there was more to the group. If you help them—with your own eminent expertise—all will be forgiven.” They all heard the implied threat of that. Regardless of however “honourable” he claimed the Library to have been.

“Both of them?” Justin nodded at her question. “Against what exactly?” She knew that this was the only deal to be made. *Of course... I should have expected more of Graham, he must have cut his own deal after all.* She sighed. This had to be it. Christy knew—without asking—that Samanya was now on his own. With his sister. She hoped that would be enough for him.

“We don’t know what, exactly. That will be up to yourself and Charles to determine. This is not, strictly speaking, a sanctioned mission, Christine.” But he looked at the man Emlen instead. “It would be much cleaner to destroy it all. With you all here, however, it’s just too good an opportunity to pass up. Will you require time to think it over? You have an hour.”

Christy spoke, “I’ll need a T9 Tattercloak and a clinch-suit—if you’ve got one—grapples of course... oh! Two repeating fletchers. Painkillers.”

Graham looked shocked at her acceptance. But, if he was here, now, then surely he must be more clued in than that? Christy felt sure that Graham must have been playing the whole Collective all along. *Whoever he is, he must be a hell of an actor.* No one could have been as foolish to think she had any other choice.

Nanograph Thirteen

Scotland – Edinburgh – Six Months Ago

Simon had been using “Black Book” codes for almost a year—an epoch in spook-time. After his uncle died and left him a few bounds in “memorandum.” In actual fact, his uncle Dougal, had truly wanted them returned; and spying was actually the family business. If he’d known that, perhaps the cracking of the first code wouldn’t have taken him so long.

As it turned out, his uncle was not dead, only gone sleeping. As much as Simon knew it was a play to get him involved, the immediate gain was just too good to be passed up. At least that’s what he told himself when they met again and Simon was brought in to the Black.

He drooled into the spittle cup. “Christ, Simon!” Kyle jumped forward to catch the fallen spill as Simon mumbled a quote from April Bound—a new meteorological sub-porn title; one of the few things he could now fluently speak. “What the hell did you get us into?” Simon wished he knew. He really did. Kyle had been so faithful over the years they’d been together, and thought that being with a spy was like living with a superhero. “Go get ‘em, Tiger,” he’d been fond of saying. That was just weeks ago.

Simon was working a case tracking black market bananas—sure seemed nuts on the surface, but as his bosses explained, “Ever needed to launder a banana?” Of course not, so he’d had to work with deep cover operatives to sort it all out. Hence the weather-core porn. The bound came from a trade with his uncle, with a certificate of unique origin. Simon was assured this bound’s text existed nowhere else in the world—or indeed, amongst the Metatext. It was a perfect code.

When the first symptoms hit, he assumed he’d been poisoned. It wasn’t unexpected. Simon threw himself into his work, knowing the only way out was to break the ring and find an antidote. As he read, the fever receded. Perhaps it had only been a day flu, after all? But it returned in the morning. And became worse. If only he could crack the case? So he read and it eased. Again and again.

But it couldn’t be? ...

It matched no Inspiration he had on file. It couldn't have been from April, no strain matched that profile. He knew that no one had cracked that genre strain—only time had ever developed Inspiration... it was none that he knew of. Could he go to the mycologists of the Business? Not if he valued his own bound hide! Nothing broke sympathy with the heads more than a spook who had gone for his own "self-improvement." Fuck. It was hitting him again.

The feeling of Inspiration was not unlike anxiety. A pain of anticipation for every word.

"Simon, you have a visitor," his partner called through to him. Entering the room, he continued, "Are you all right for him?" A foolish question—if Kyle was asking, it must be urgent. "He says he's a friend of your uncle's..."

"Simon," the tall man bustled in behind Kyle, "My name is Charles," and he removed his absurd, neon goggles, "How are you feeling?"

Kyle demurred, leaving them alone.

In a few, short questions, Simon knew this man was not friendly with his uncle. But he knew so much detail... about his symptoms. As if he knew what was wrong with him. Kyle tried to rouse himself, tried to sit up and demand what he knew.

Charles just sat by him, murmuring softly, melodically, as if in great care.

"It was the only way to effect a wide-release test of it, you see, piggy-backing on your uncle's well laid organisation. There was too much danger otherwise, that the programme would be discovered early. He was a mule, you just a test subject. I'm sorry for that, but you must understand? It's out now, via the AA Project archives, no less! So no risk in visiting now and giving my regards." He said more, to Simon's unresisting form. But that was enough.

When Charles finally chose to leave, Simon was drenched in a cold sweat, even quaking from his partner's touch.

Kyle looked away from his wild eyes and spoke to Simon's mother, who must have come in to the room—the two of them taking turns reading aloud to him.

"It's starting again, can you take over reading?" She must have nodded, because Simon saw the two of them change over.

His mother began to read and his need—child-like—eased.

Simon twisted uncomfortably and his mum looked down on him with tender pity, lifting the bound up to his eyes.

“Here son, you can read along with me.”

Chapter Fourteen

Graham

London – Kings Cross – Now

Justin and Emlen were discussing what sounded to Graham like suicide. Justin telling them, “Once we’ve pin-pointed the true location of the black—through your expertise, Charles—we want you two to go in after the catalogue. The black, as it is, is too dangerous to leave alone, the plan so far had been to carpet bomb it to the ground. But if you can get inside before then and get out with the data, all the better.”

“But you won’t risk it yourself,” Emlen stated.

Justin shook his head at that, “Too dangerous. But it’s your way back in, Charles, if that’s what you want. I will honour your intent in coming here and give you this one free pass. But think! If you do this for us, we’d actually be in your debt.” Emlen had been considering that when Christy came along, throwing about with a laser torch and then had surprised them all with her ready acceptance of the insane deal. *Fuck, didn’t I misjudge her? Seemed that everyone but Graham had their own secret lives... Then again, how quickly have I changed, myself?*

The plan came together swiftly after that, until there they were, with their final move planned.

“This is where you think it is?” the Head Librarian asked, looking over the projected surface.

Graham had watched Christy and Emlen for hours as they’d argued over and dismissed countless other sites. Christy had a map of the money, which Emlen whittled away, making further connections. He had in fact asked Graham for his own input at times, *Though not nearly often enough. I know it, I’m really just a third wheel now.* Still, he watched the two of them work at it and struggled to make sense of it all. But Graham didn’t fully understand the methodologies Emlen was putting to the problem, so he tried to wait it out—anxiously.

Graham paced the study. Justin's control room was ostentatiously free of any bounds; was so blankly contemptuous of his own position. Yup, he felt right to hate the man.

"The wretched wilds of Scotland. Fantastic. Now, this isn't going to be one of those piddling 'community libraries,' is it?" Justin didn't sound much impressed by the thought.

"What are they?" asked Graham. Confused by it all.

Justin spoke over the map whilst still perusing the details of it, "Come the turn of the millennium, some of the shires of Scotland rose up against cuts to the—then—Scottish National Library, and whole townships loaned their libraries dry. The bounds were never returned, the buildings were shut, so when the licenses were eventually called, no one claimed to know where they'd all gone. But the old bounds must still be in circulation... We know they have to have been maintained, but the memberships are strictly secret, 'passed down from father to son' and all that. Ridiculous. More like a secret handshake than a lending service. Can't have been acquiring anything new. Quite useless," he pondered on that, "... The Scots were always different to us."

"Which is of course why they were the first collections we discounted, Justin. None of this is simple, if you're going to second guess me..." No, Justin shook his head at that, showing that he *was* going to trust Emlen. So the "Bibliometricist" continued, "Then this is where we go." Emlen pointed at the map.

"And that comes back to me," said Christy. "When we find the precise site, you say we'll have thirty to get in and complete the task?"

"That's right," Justin nodded.

"Not much time," Christy frowned.

"Then you will have to work hard and true—all of you. We would rather lose everything than allow it to get out." Justin stood, offering his glass of whiskey to Graham; just to hold it, he knew it wasn't to finish it for him. "Our response is not only to support confidence in our system—" Christy had actually, visually started when the

enormity of it had been explained to her. Unlike Graham, she had immediately seen the consequences and, he believed, the potential... “But global stability as well. We first became aware of this activity when we were called in by MI6 to consult on an extremist case. The woman they held was a radical Buddhist—a true Zen Punk—sought to disrupt our perceived reality. She was picked up carrying tracts and so they called in the Library. What was of more concern, however, were the footnotes. ‘Gibberish,’ they said. MI6 suspected it was in code... we immediately understood it was in fact bibliographic. None of it matched our catalogues, however, and the references were almost considered an elaborate hoax.

“Impossible bounds, Writers who did not exist... until, quite by accident, we found one of them and proved that they did. On an Amish farm. A Writer, an Author; he still wrote in longhand—how absurd is that?” Justin stopped by his sideboard and stared down at the walnut cabinet. He moved, unstopped the decanter and after twisting three glasses up from the leather-clad surface, slashed odd fingers of whiskey into each. “Drink. The lot of you.”

It was only polite for Graham to take another of his own. “Is he dead, too?” Graham asked then. He swallowed. He could smell it from the inside of his own head, the taste of it as it fell down his throat, leaving an almost pleasant sense of indigestion.

Justin withered him and continued, “Joseph wrote on the pastoral identity of God; importantly, he still had his own copy of the cited text. Again, it had been copied by hand. Obviously no one had anticipated *that* copy—thank God for that man and his obsession with writing, or we’d have nothing to go on.” Emlen snorted.

“The point is, global terrorism has been furthered by these invisible texts. With the research possible on lost... on stillborn bounds.”

“He’s a necromancer. Our man in his black library. Researching from the dead,” Emlen spoke this with perfect seriousness.

“If you will. ‘Necromancer.’ Whoever it is, they not only threaten the ‘text itself, he’s a terrorist who could use them to launder data or make unbreakable codes. We’ve suspected some of the collection likely came from Ransoms, but we’ve not been able to

grasp the ratio of ransom to unknowable. Whoever he is, he has access to a great undiscovered trove—fueling perfectly encrypted academia. There *is* a reason for our system, after all this,” he waved, “You must understand, Mr Nutt, knowledge is power and if we cannot stop the Metatext, then it must instead be a race to encourage total access.”

“That’s a moot argument, Justin, it’s simply the way our world works.” Emlen sorted another glass for him. Graham realised he still held Justin’s first—he finished it himself. “What remains is that this ‘trove’ of his is merely a trial for the three of us.”

“If you will.” Justin appeared more comfortable speaking of that. “You will be our point as well, however, confirming the strike zone.” Emlen nodded, as did Christy.

“We’re going to be at ground zero?” asked Graham. “Are you going to napalm us?”

“No, they wouldn’t, Graham. This is to be a low key job, yes?” Christy looked to Justin for confirmation and he agreed. “But I’m not going in without the strongest of assurances.”

“Very well,” he said. “We’ll bring you in. As a Librarian.” Graham caught the look that passed then between Justin and Emlen at that, *Now?*—it seemed to ask. Christy looked too dumbstruck to tell it. “Full training. It can’t have escaped you—not even considering our black collection—that the publishing war is heating up.” She nodded then. “Agents have always been strongly contested between the Houses and ourselves, which is why we share responsibility for your training. The time is coming for our sleepers to wake. We had always considered you for promotion. When you disappeared, we wondered. Well, now you’ve returned, you’ve only proved that our interest in you was warranted.”

The three of them nodded, as if in understanding of one another. Christy’s eyes then hooded and she made what looked like an almost subconscious step back from what had been a circle of four. *She’s already accepted her position, now Justin’s the new boss.* “And me?” asked Graham.

“Get out alive, Mr Nutt, and I’m sure you’re smart enough to conceive of the

understanding we'll be willing to take into the future.”

Graham laughed. “Ha! As if I'd want to take part in any more of this insanity!”

By the time they were on the Railgun Train to Scotland they were on their own. Time counted down between the twin curtains of blue sparks flying from the rail below, hiding the scenery from sight.

“Fort William. By Ben Nevis. I remember camping there on my Dad's Laird holding, once,” said Christy. When Graham had looked at her oddly. “It was a joke-gift, all right? We got him some land out in the forest there so he could call himself a ‘Laird’—Lord. It's a gag.” He still didn't get it. “Anyway, what does it look like from there on out?” She had come to defer to Emlen—almost obsequiously. Graham wasn't sure that he entirely believed it, but he supposed she must be preparing for her first performance review.

“We locate the collection. That will be my job—interviewing. Then it's up to you to get us inside.”

Christy had indeed spent an apparently delirious thirty minutes in the British Library's armory. She'd been supremely decisive, “This and that—Mark II, if you can get it to me in ten,” but then started second-guessing herself almost immediately. They all followed her down to be fitted, but it felt more like being herded together. Christy took perhaps twice as long as she probably should have and as far as Graham was concerned, it hadn't mattered at all. “You just keep what you have on you Graham, you wouldn't know what to do with the equipment if you had it.” That's what she told him, but under her appraising eye, *Maybe she respects me more than I thought she did?* Graham thought about it, *I wish I had her faith...* He knew that this was likely just a trade of one execution for another. Graham had cursed Emlen for taking them right into the Library, but quickly saw there was never really any choice in the matter. A life on the run, or a slim chance?

“Do you want me to do anything, except stay alive?” he asked.

“When we're inside, Graham, you can help me load as much of the data as we can.

Stay on the job. And please don't get too negative," said Emlen.

"How easy for you to say!" Graham looked down in disgust at his cheese sandwich. The squeal of the train's skids along the rails cut into his stomach and he found he didn't want to eat at all.

"Don't complain," said Christy. "Once we've located the black library, Mr Fortesque *said* he would arrange for a distraction. This should be simple."

As simple as breaking in to the Atrium all those... weeks ago? Jesus, so it was finally coming to a head.

Emlen nodded her way and Graham tried to ignore them for the rest of the trip and forced down his lunch.

They switched at Glasgow, where Emlen lamented not being able to step from the station. "This city has such a lovely, old Soviet feel to it. As if all their grand monuments are made of concrete..." They would have to take his word for it, as the last time Graham had been in Russia it'd been nothing like gritty, lost Glasgow. "The second city of the Empire?" Glasgow was where the old cutting-edge became real, it had actually become the most cyberpunk city in the world.

Light rail took them out from the city far enough to go above ground, though there were no windows on the train to see out and back. Arriving safely at the bus port out of town, they were on their way to Fort William.

Emlen bunked them in a very industrial bed and breakfast. Christy dug them in, gluing "this way out" miniature Claymores at all entrances. It was her job to make sure there were no nasty surprises from the Black—before the three of them were ready, at least.

"Claymores? How very Scottish," stated Emlen obscurely. Then continued, "You stay here, Graham. Christy, you will follow me."

"What the hell am I supposed to do in here alone? I can help," said Graham.

"I don't even need Christy with me, but Justin has charged me with beginning her

education. You should stay here. Relax. Read a book.” Graham considered that must be a joke, as they were on full textual silence.

“Fucking fine,” he replied. He thought he’d sleep. *On a bedspread that looks like it’s made of asbestos.*

“We should be back shortly. If we’re not back in two, consider security as breached and blow the charges we left in the foyer. That should give you enough of a distraction to get yourself out.” Emlen handed him a thumb-plunger.

“What charges?” Graham asked.

But Emlen just spoke over him, finishing with, “Try not to dwell on that unless you must. Have a nice hot shower and some tea instead.” He had insisted on bringing real tea from the British Library’s own stock. *He’s sociopathic*, thought Graham, *that, or he’s much too far gone.*

As they left him in the room alone, Graham felt like a child being left to his own responsibility. The flashback to childhood made him feel sick.

As it turned out, he waited only an hour and a half before they returned—squabbling. It was a sudden comfort to listen to their discussing facet analysis. Graham decided then to take his overdue shower. He explicitly did not ask them if they had found the site. But still, Emlen slipped in to the little shower room to fill him in on the details anyway. It was a statement to how far he’d gone from what was normal that it didn’t feel invasive—in fact, it felt a little like how Surith would have nipped in to discuss content for *Word Play* whilst they were on the road.

“We have a site. Most of the town seems to be employed by the Black, one way or another. The run around we got, one would have to assume whoever programmed those responses must have known how it’d appear to another Librarian. It’s too obvious. It’s a map straight to the library itself. Christine is going to recon it now, for reporting back tonight.” Graham nodded behind the curtain, running the suds from his body. That meant the job would happen tonight. “Be prepared.”

“A map?” he muttered, “Or is it a trap?” Still, he did as he was told. Not that he

had very much to prepare. He pulled on the same trousers and steel mesh top he'd already owned, along with the new suspension boots and "Archivist" gloves the Library had given him. Emlen showed him how to use the black-node mobile they were using.

When Christy returned—wearing patterned fabrics that somehow made his head hurt to look at—Graham averted his gaze. He was glad she'd survived the raid on the Atrium, so long ago, but he felt betrayed by her now she was in league with Emlen and the Library.

"Have you confirmed the collection?" Emlen asked.

"It's right where you thought it would be. Well, at least there's a secured manor house out there." Emlen nodded. "I have a rough map of the grounds and a projected interior." Emlen unfolded his feeder and gestured for her to use it. "There are extensive grounds all round here," she swept a line. "With manned guard posts at each of these points." Dot. Dot. Dot. "The walls of the house and then the interiors I could guess." From the high quality of the "sketch," Graham figured her to be particularly skilled at guessing.

"How would you rate the defences?" asked Emlen after he looked over the map.

"High..." she drew out that word, "But there seems to be very little technological security. From what I observed, if we can time our entry correctly, we should be able to get in unnoticed. In fact, the ease of it makes me nervous."

Emlen laughed. Sharply. "Not necessary. I presume that the Necromancer's main defence is his obscurity. After all, that is his area of expertise." Emlen had started calling him the "Necromancer," the researcher of dead books. Trailing his index finger through the remnants of their bounds like entrails. Graham flashed to recall his dream at Charlotte's brothel. The tombstones left unread. He wondered why Emlen had chosen such an ominous title for him?

After performing one final equipment check, they awaited the early dark of the north. As night came, Graham looked between the three of them and realised they all looked sleek and hard.

“Now.” And Graham surprised himself, agreeing that he was ready.

They ran after Christy, giving her five ahead, through the dead lands of sparse forest. They passed one unconscious guard. As good a landmark they were onsite as any other. Over the lawns, whilst searchlights checked around them, dead grasses lit only by the amplification of the glasses all three of them wore.

The two men stopped, catching up with Christy by the manor house wall.

Graham was inordinately thankful for the past weeks now, as if he had only really been in training for this. Fitter than he had been in years.

Christy had them all synch their wrist-strapped mobiles, counting down to synchronicity with her fingers. She nodded. Set herself. Fired her grapple over the wall and expertly began scaling it.

“Can we really trust Justin and the Library?” Graham quietly asked Emlen while they waited on her to return.

“Trust? No. Anticipate them to work for us on their own behalf? Probably.” Graham waited for something else, something better. Emlen said nothing.

Christy flashed two brief updates on their mobiles in that time. She was still clear and reconning.

Then from the distance off in town, the sky brightened. It took a moment to hear the explosions. At least they weren't on top of them.

“That should be our cue, Justin has started his promised distraction.” But Emlen hesitated. It had already been ten since Christy went in.

“There's activity,” she said from behind them. Christy was a cloud of fabric strips and stiffened wire—all of which only partially hid the clinch-suit compressing her body around the meeting of limbs, making of her a comic book heroine in cut muscle; the Mars-standard pressure suit, giving her superhuman strength here on Earth. “That should mask our work.” She looked behind her, over her shoulder.

Graham saw that there was a chunk of her Tattercloak missing. “Is everything all right?”

She laughed softly, “As well as can be. I met a guard—I suspect he was a guard, though there aren’t many people inside.” Her humour cut short. “We can go in through an entrance round the side, it’ll be easier than going over the roof as I did.”

Emlen looked both ways and considered. Graham looked up the sheer wall himself and his calves tensed solid. Emlen nodded her way, however, and gestured she should lead them. *Thank you for that, at least!*

“Where’s the security?” asked Graham as they slipped in the door. After the buzzway at the Library, the Gestalts at Retreat and hell, even the mines they’d had at their own collection... “It’s weird.”

Inside, it was a well-preserved Scots’ manor house circa eighteenth century. “This level is living space, but it’s different once we go below.” They passed swords and shields arrayed upon the walls, mounted deer heads and old-fashioned holographic photographs. One of them had an inscription, “Three Generations of the Lairds McDougall.” Christy nodded at the holo.

“You think that’s him?” asked Graham as he looked closer at the picture.

“Could be. The lands are under the name ‘Dougal McDougall.’ So keep a look out for that one, he’s probably our Necromancer.” Emlen spoke, pointing at the middle-aged figure on the left of the holo. There was an unusual feeling to the whole job, none of them were speaking in anything below a stage-whisper. “It’s down here?” Emlen asked Christy.

“Yes. Be prepared. Sir, you won’t expect this.” And they followed her to a doorway, then stairs leading down into the wood-paneled basement. The quality of light variegated down, till it came softly over every edge.

There was shelf after shelf of countless kinds of bounds. Emlen stopped, a pianist’s fingers counting across their spines.

“I checked. They all appear to be Ransomed; I recognised Writers, but none of the

titles.” Graham started when Christy said that and really looked around him. Hundreds of bounds, many merely stuffed however they were, doused in dust as if from a powder extinguisher. Each one of them, another potential Nicolas—literally, another faceless Writer. Bile jumped up Graham’s throat and before he could stop himself, he spit up a yellow stream of it on the thick pile of the carpet.

“Christ, Graham! That’s disgusting.” Christy scowled at him as he could only swallow, leaving the sticky mess of it where it lay. The stomach acid burnt like shame in him. Emlen ignored them both.

The Librarian pulled a volume from the shelf. “But they’re illuminated...”

“What?” asked Graham, latching on to Emlen’s shock and trying to put his own mind off of the scene itself.

“Hand painted, gilt in gold and silver leaf, beautiful... No, it’s impossible. I thought the Illuminated Brotherhood had been destroyed in the takeover of Twenty-eighteen.” He thrust the bound at Christy and grasped up another, opening it—it was so thick and heavy that the spine creaked more like a hinge than bond. He took another. Yes, it flashed gold in what must have been the... gas light? Graham looked around the room, at the wall-hung lamps and their steady, low flames, as if barely lit oxy torches. His eyes contracted, as did his gut.

Emlen continued, “They were monks—they pretended to be monks—who made exquisite forgeries of bounds... Until one of the Houses found them out and bought their landholdings from the Church. They were evicted from their ancestral lands. At the time there was talk of re-training them, re-locating them in ones or twos. I never thought they could have survived so completely, but these pieces are exquisite... Where did he get them from?” Both Christy and Emlen looked through them, bound after bound.

Graham looked at the room itself. The wooden paneling appeared warming, but at the joints, where the torches showed through, was the set stone underneath. It felt wrong. “Guys, we should keep going, the Library is going to be here soon.” The other two looked up at Graham, alarmed, pausing a moment to recall who they were working for. *I don’t have any idea which of them is worse—Library, Necromancer ... Emlen—and I*

don't want to be here to find out. Get through, get out, and maybe life will be right once again. They moved on.

That room led to another. Christy hadn't been down that far and didn't know the way. Emlen attempted to follow the shelving system, tried taking them through by the map of it. But finally, he said he could find no method, he was lost in the library.

Deeper and deeper into the now nineteen-seventies wood-paneled warren—decor hiding the dingy, damp basement beneath.

The three of them pushed through. Walls enclosing them, turning into tunnels which twisted like entrails. The tunnels started as short edges, breaks between shelves and leading a bare few feet into new rooms. Then lengthened. Shelf paneling giving way to their stone bedding. Bounds then literally set *into* the stonework, like skulls in a catacomb.

“It's obscene,” exclaimed Emlen. “Monstrous.” He pulled a bound free, dry resin crumbling from its edges. “They're cemented in, like a ‘bound preserved in amber’...”

“Sir,” hissed Christy to Emlen, “up ahead.” They all looked the way she pointed. To see a flickering light. As Graham focused upon it, his glasses' light-amplification began to flicker, targeting circles and connections becoming a futile multitude.

“Be ready for this, Christine.” She nodded at Emlen and led the way.

The Necromancer read by candlelight. “Do you realise paper is best read by natural light?” he asked, without looking up.

None of them responded.

“It is. The ‘refractive qualities’ of the page absorb white light, but reflect back the softer yellow hues.” He placed a ribbon between the pages of his bound. “Please, take off your glasses, they'll not help you here. Yes. I have long hoped for visitors like you. I left secret messages for you—only you, only another who'd loved the real books could ever have found those clues. Who is it I must thank?” he asked, looking up, between the three of them.

Emlen raised his hand.

“Oh, good. You have the look of one of those pitiable ‘Librarians,’ but there must be more to you than that.” He continued on, speaking about Emlen to the two of them standing at his side. “The ‘British Library.’ They can only think in links and in data, bare-bound books terrify them! Don’t they? Don’t they?” He grinned, asking Emlen the same.

“Yes, they do.”

“I can see you’re different, you couldn’t have found me here if you weren’t. That’s the beauty of it, you see? The very people who most want to find me and I am invisible to them. They fear this.” He waved at the precarious stacks of bounds around them all.

“And you two, I recognise your faces... you were a part of the Collective in Islington, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” they agreed.

“Well! I never expected much of that plan, but it’s good to see something come of it. Fantastic. So what can I do for you?”

Emlen stepped closer to him. “How are they shelved? How have you organised this library?” he asked. “I don’t understand. I must know.”

The Necromancer—the young McDougall, aged thirty or so years from the photo upstairs—laughed. “By the location in which I stole them.” Graham watched Emlen suddenly blanch beneath his glasses. McDougall held his gaze, then said, “But yes, there is a catalogue of that, you fool.” He said it warmly and pointed to the side of the room. The two of them turned, Graham's eyes followed, but there was nothing there, no screen, only a sideboard with numerous tiny drawers.

“I don’t understand,” said Graham.

“He’s insane,” was Emlen’s answer. “You must be kidding! You kept a card catalogue?” The Necromancer only smiled at Emlen’s anger.

“I’ve enjoyed being here in the shadows, my friends, but I feel this must be

coming to an end. I've heard the rumours, changes are afoot—I was once a spy, you know, we clipped newspapers and read oh-so many books—I still keep my eyes clear. This," he swung his hands wide, "is where the power lies! The only true power is in secret power. I know you understand. When the war begins, it will be the Writers who will rule, withholding their books from an unworthy world. And only we will have them." He smiled beatifically.

"He's just a frustrated Author," said Christy. "What now?"

Emlen held up his hand for her to be silent. "Tell me, is there more, Dougal, is there a greater scheme?"

"Is this not enough?" he asked Emlen in return. Emlen shook his head.

Graham wondered, *Just how disappointed is Emlen?* He seemed deflated, as if he had been seeking a greater challenge. "You are a fool, then," Emlen said. "The only true power, 'Necromancer,' is the power that you tell nobody." And he shot him in the eyes.

With the code-scanner he'd drawn from his side like a snake.

Graham only saw the Necromancer's eyes flash red in reflection, before he twisted to see the gun that Emlen suddenly held poised.

The man at the lectern recoiled, as Emlen calmly told Christy. "Get him now." And she leapt forward at Dougal, directly over his lectern and bound, knocking him prone with a flying kick.

One more karate chop to the neck and he fell properly.

"Stay there with him," Emlen said quickly, "Don't let him call for anyone." Spoken meaninglessly, a fuller communication passing between the two of them in code. "Graham, with me, we'll check the catalogue ourselves." So Graham followed, as Emlen strode across the floor.

"What are we looking for? I've never used one of these things."

"No one has, just try the best you can." Emlen muttered, "What does Justin expect me to find in a hole like this?" Graham stayed quiet and slid a drawer free.

Inside there was card after card of entries. He had no idea what to make of them. *Hand-written!* He recognised Writers, titles and what he guessed were “subjects.” “But how do they come together?” he asked.

Emlen sighed, “Card to card. Keep them open to cross-reference.”

“Is there still time for this?” asked Graham, fumbling through useless rectangles of bond, perhaps twice the size of Emlen’s own business cards.

“No, it’s already come.” Graham turned, looking around to Christy’s voice, before then following her curious gaze. Her expression was not shocked, only far away and counting the most practical moves from here. He saw the tentacle of fog, peeping through the open corridor. Then came further arms of it. It was like an explosion of dry ice, translucent pellets followed by a pale green fog.

“Already?” asked Emlen. “Fine, sort yourself and then help Graham with his bubble. The Necromancer can handle himself.” Graham looked between the fog—the gas—at the entrance and to Emlen and Christy. Then at the man unconscious on the floor.

Emlen continued riffling through the cards as Christy stepped over the body and went toward Graham.

“What’s this?” he asked. Christy had pulled two entree plate-sized rings from the bag off her shoulder.

“Anchor rings for the bubble helmets. Should protect you from the worst of the gas. You pull them over your head,” she squeezed it down over him, the space between the ring covered in a clear plastic membrane, “Like this.” He began to struggle, his face enveloped in the clinging plastic. “Then you pump. Stop struggling. Pump here. With this.” Christy grabbed at his hand, where it had been trying to free his head and laid it on a lever. Graham clutched at it madly, twitching and worrying it. *They’ve done it again!* Christy guided his hand, as if he were a child. The membrane began to expand around him, bubbling, contorting out unevenly. He gasped—the bubble collapsed—he pumped—he gasped. Each time he took a breath, the damn thing would suck in around his face. “Try not to hyperventilate, you idiot, take it easy. The Termight gas isn’t going

to be effective for another minute or so anyway.” He would have kept laughing hysterically at that, but the first few gulps turned into the worst hiccups he’d ever suffered. Instead, he kept pumping.

After all that, the helmet came together smoothly, with the bubble going firm with pressure. So, while Christy fixed her own bubble, Graham went back to Emlen. “Keep looking for cards that reference these.” He handed Graham a handful of index cards. “If nothing else, we can buy ourselves back in by giving Justin some Writers to ‘prosecute.’” He said it in such a procedural way that Graham shuddered. Still, he took the cards and kept looking, while Emlen put on his own apparatus.

Christy crouched back by the Necromancer and tied a strip of cloth over his mouth and nose.

Emlen said, “We’ll have to leave, it won’t take long for the Termight gas to begin eating through our skin. Christine, get yourself back topside quickly, wave our transport down. You—” he said, having turned to Graham.

But was interrupted. “No! I won’t leave him. Sir,” she completed herself.

“Can you carry him?” retorted Emlen. “Can you pick up the guards you left behind? I won’t stop you, Christine. Do it. Take him up to the garden where they’ll find you. I’ll follow. Graham. Stay.” She scowled at Emlen, but said nothing.

Graham watched as Christy made her decision and went back to the unconscious Necromancer. “Come. Come, Graham.” He hesitated after Emlen, watching Christy lift the man over her shoulder. Graham watched the puffs of gas, in-and-out at his lips, the man’s face suddenly ragged. Saw the Necromancer was weeping viscous tears of fat down his face. Graham quaked. “What is that?” But she had heft the limp man free of the ground and already carried him out the passageway.

“Follow me, Graham!” He followed Emlen through a partially concealed, unseen doorway.

“Where are we going? I didn’t see this passage before.” The inside of the bubble heaved in and out in unison with his worry.

“It was well hidden. His escape route—he wasn’t entirely a fool, after all.”

“But how did you know it was here?”

Emlen didn’t answer, but turned and said instead, “This is your one chance to get free, Graham. The Library will forgive you this once, but they’ll use you if they can. Best to disappear for a while. Go back to the club and talk with Adam, I’ll be in touch and help you if I can.”

“What? No. It wouldn’t be right. Look at this? I can’t leave you behind.” Graham looked at it himself, at the Termight gas beginning to eat away at the bounds around them. He realised that it was all important to him, even as it fell apart.

“Graham!” he said, “Don’t be a fool. I knew all about this, about your ‘Collective.’ All along. That’s how I can get you out of here now. I have to get back inside. That’s what this whole charade has been for, to get me back inside. It’s all gone as far as it can with me outside of the Library. But you don’t have to be sucked into it as well. Go.” Emlen shuffled around Graham, slipping back along the now gooey shelving. Then turned and pushed Graham further along. “Follow this tunnel, it will lead you out past the town. I have travel gear I left there for you, with an anonymised mobile.” His bubble lurched forward against Graham. “Go!”

“I have no idea how this is happening.” Graham tried to formulate it as a question. But Emlen spun on his toes, going back the way the two of them had come with nothing else to say.

Emlen was gone. Graham kept thinking. Then stopped abruptly. Instead, he turned and followed the tunnel away. It was only set with bounds for a few hundred feet along the walls, then it was bare stone. He kept moving. Graham began to run. It was the atmosphere of the tunnel itself, accelerating him away from the manor house. He kept rushing.

It took him more than half an hour to reach the end of the escape tunnel and when he did, Graham saw that Emlen was true to his word. The items of clothing he had left were even a fit for the new man who reached them: Gray; he laughed when he saw that his new suit was an origami of folded bond. It was like an old wallet he’d once been

given, paper folded into utility. He felt the soft material, thinking it must have been scrunched in someone's fist; indeed many, many times to be so broken and lovely. The cellulose fibres, loose and comfortable. What was bond, after all, than a crushed and tangled felt of pulp?

And one final gift: a bound. Its only title, "*Bound Zero*," penciled on the front page. Written in Emlen's own hand.

He stayed in that hideaway for a long time after that.

Nanograph Fourteen

London – Kings Cross – Now

Kelvin's clients were sensitive to speculation bubbles. Especially after what had happened during the cookbook novels fiasco—though even now, he could anticipate a precarious new trend in Speculative Fiction... It wasn't only money that they'd lost either. Some of the Mom and Pop wreaders had bought in on that boom, had lost their Writers, along with all their savings.

The BLX808 traded Writer shares on the standard Readership Index, Kelvin had seen Writers drop into oblivion because of market instability many times. Still, he had it on firm authority this was the way the industry had always worked: bundling “rubbish” wreader shares with proven Writers. Of course in the past, those wreaders had been limited to those the Houses had sucked-in, gotten behind and re-published under their own brand. That changed when the Houses had floated Writership, however—when the Cache Futures had gone live. Then the money had gotten bigger—and so had the risks. Now anyone could buy in.

It had been a disaster all day, since the calls started coming in from his clients early that morning. The markets were in free-fall. Some Writers suddenly vastly inflated, others worthless.

Kelvin flinched as the newest figures came in; they weren't right. He looked over his shoulder at the Librarian shadowing him, how could he explain this to her?

“It's not right, is it?” she asked on her own accord.

“I'm sorry, but this doesn't match the modeling at all.” Choinski scowled at that—hopefully not in his direction. Kelvin continued, “It's been happening all day, the demand for books dropping across the board, while bounds sales are surging.” She began to nod, what did she know? He wondered. “It's almost like what they say happened in Dublin, with a rush on buying bounds after the infestation... but it's not just one genre people are buying, it's anything bond that they can get their hands on. The market can't hold this, the higher bound prices go, the more skewed book prices are, the more strain there'll be on the 'text...”

The Librarian nodded. “And the less our failsafes will hold. Wreaders—

everyone—they're snatching up all the bounds they can get a hold of, like they're buying supplies before the hurricane hits. There are already rumours of the Houses' moving into hostile acquisitions..."

Kelvin looked at her in hope. "Do you know what it means?"

She laughed! "It means we'll both be out of a job!" Then continued under her breath, "At best."

But her Agent's brain was telling her: bloodbath. Renegotiate!

Chapter Fifteen

Christy

London — Bank — Now

She saw him again six months later, while she was waiting for her pub meal at the Old Queen's Head. He was sitting over a soda with an old bound, its spine cracked-back onto itself, like a caricature of a torture victim.

Christy would have turned away, but while she looked him over curiously for that instant, he looked up over his bound and at his drink. He saw her.

"Graham!" she called, before he could say anything. "Graham." Though he looked very different from the way she remembered him. He was sitting there by himself, with his lunch, indolently perusing his twisted—she turned her own head to read the bound's title—*Modern Bibliographica*. Different indeed, a title the old Graham would have feared.

"Bun?" he asked, though without the humour she'd heard in the nickname coming from her new boss.

They were both confused by their meeting, but she knew his confusion was in seeing her at all; she, because the chance meeting shouldn't have happened.

Regardless, she decided to continue on, "I didn't think I would see you again." And that might have been for the best, but for now, she sat by him at the booth where he read. "First, I wasn't sure if perhaps Emlen had killed you back at the manor, even after the rumours that you were still about—in fact, I'd wondered if you weren't a part of it all along..." She looked closely at his face, but he didn't flinch. He only closed the pages over a beer mat.

Christy waited for him to answer. As long as she might once have waited on a child she thought knew the answer to her question. But he didn't. She looked around at the pub, at the hush of it all. Gra-Gray-ham—he wasn't the only one reading quietly.

Instead, Christy said, "Come out with me, we can walk."

He followed her, but packed his things slowly before leaving. She waited by the door.

Out in the bright April afternoon, Christy broached him, “Anyway. I am glad to see you alive, Graham. Though it’s ‘Gray,’ now, isn’t it? What happened to you after the raid?”

He nodded and asked, instead of answering her, “So you three made it out alive, then?”

“Alive, yes. It’s been hard going since—since I’ve been seconded to Emlen’s division at the Library.” She looked at him, at his ur-leathers and at the geek chic glasses he still wore around his neck. “I’m still not sure you aren’t a part of it. Of everything that’s happened since.”

“A part of what?”

How can he not know? “You must have seen the signs of it, I can see it in the feeders every day.”

Gray narrowed his eyes. “The disappearances. The shootings.” She nodded; that he should continue. “Yes, I’ve seen those reports. Publishers and Writers. I looked for mention of the Library, but I never have—though really, I figured I never would: who would think to report on anything so dull as that?” He shook his head, “I wasn’t sure what to think of it all.” He didn’t break his forward gaze. “We stopped the war. Didn’t we?” She could see that he wasn’t sure about that... “Dammit,” he finally said. “What went wrong?”

“Look around you, Gray!” Christy’s own eyes darted. But didn’t fix on anything.

His eyes still hadn’t shifted from the destination he was taking them. When had she started following him? In fact, he was so fixed, he seemed to be looking through walls ahead.

“I’ve learnt not to look around, it only invites the worst from them.” But he didn’t look scared.

“Then you’ve seen it too.” She paused—just a moment out of step—while they strode past two men struggling against each other down a side street. Christy couldn’t see what it was about, but she could guess. Violence was increasing in the cities, in the most urbane of neighbourhoods. If *Gray* had seen it, then it was really bad, wasn’t it?...

“Yes,” he said. “Mustn’t provoke the very voracious and most literate zombies.”

The news hadn’t yet caught on, there were rumours in the outside world, but it wasn’t understood yet. Men, women, children, all fighting in the streets over... nothing? That’s what it seemed. That’s what the authorities couldn’t understand; but she knew, the Library knew, even Graham did: bond. Scraps of bond, or whole bounds. Worthless? Not to the victims. The attackers would kill for a bound.

“I’ve seen horrible—tragic—things, Gray. I’ve seen a woman wrapped against the cold night wind in sheets of blood-spattered bond. But she wasn’t sleeping. Instead, she was reading. What do we make of that?”

They walked, briskly now, under newly threatening posters, each flashing snippets of Metatext. Who knew when such background might now jump out and snare them in a reading-like coma? But Christy knew the ‘text itself might not suffer much longer. And then what? She knew—or at least thought she knew—a lot of dangerous things. The two walked.

“Emlen.” It came out of the both of them together.

“Yes,” she said loud, glad someone else—anyone else—had thought it too. “There’s a new weapon in publishing—*Narrative*—came out of Hatchet three months ago, about to hit the scene. It’s a non-genre specific strain of *Inspiration*...”

“God. No one will be immune.” Gray started a deep breath—stopped himself. Sucked in his lips, as if tasting the air.

“Exactly. It’s not like the ‘Gothic’ from Dublin, either, anything will do, any bound. There’s some theory that it’s keyed to Hatchet’s bounds—which would lock the addicts to just their output—but there’s no evidence of that, not yet, it’s still far too wild. For now it’s enough to say that it just makes people want to read. Agents have been

using the new strain to disrupt everything, charging and re-charging the other Houses for the simplest of texts. Hatchet seems to have a deal with only the worst Agents right now, but who knows how long that might last? The other Houses are in an uproar, all fighting over the same deals they'd thought were long-since done to the 'text. They're the reports, the killings. Emlen took to it immediately, of course and being back in the Library as this came together was like a dream for him..."

They took the next corner wide, it was becoming second nature again to give herself room to move. Attacks were becoming far too unpredictable. But around the corner there was nothing—the streets were deserted, clean as if swept clear. Litterless, not the waste of scraps, takeaway containers and packaging, once slumped in puddles of rotting rice pulp around London, nothing. All snatched away by frantic *Narrative* addicts, who read and read anything as much as a burger wrapper—and for nothing, wasting away for want in a world of textual abundance.

What Christy hadn't told Graham, was that the woman in her bond sheets had been acquisitioned by the Library. Christy had been there—had led the charge—spraying her in anti-fungal mist, wrapping her up for study. Imprisoned for... dissection. Who would have thought Christy would so quickly find herself on the other side of a Library cell?

Graham interrupted her fear. "He told me, back at the Black, that he knew about Dougal, the Necromancer, from all along—that he only wanted back in. But it's more than that, since his accusation—for the murder? You know? He told me what he wanted, was to make it readers were... accountable for their reading. Saving himself, as if he could work everything backwards from there."

"Well I don't know much about that, no one knows much about Emlen. But maybe? The first thing the Library has on him is breaking him out of a cell." She thought about that—not really surprised—then nodded. "It just seemed too perfect. I think he must have planned everything all along. Emlen back at the Library. He's been made acting Head for the term of the crisis, you know? Dealing with circulation 'issues,' just what he's good at."

"But how could he have? Would he have put himself in such danger? We were

shot at in the chase.”

“Maybe he planned all that, too. Did you ever really see who was after you? Could have been mercenaries he’d hired for himself.” Christy paused, to consider. “It’s been a score for the Library, though... ‘Bounds,’ ‘books,’ *lending* has become central to law and order in some key states of the US—it hasn’t hit us here so strongly yet—there’s drug prevention funding, neighbourhood watch money going into buying collections of bounds, just to feed the new *Narrative* habits.”

“That’s disgusting!” said Graham.

She laughed. That sounded like the old guy. But maybe she’d just had more time to become appropriately fatalistic about the facts. “I think it was all a ruse,” she said. “The Black is absolutely lost, the Termight more than did its job, but the data you saved... it leads to bounds riddled with *Narrative*. The Necromancer lent them out as codebooks, it looks like he was patient zero for the infection. Though we’re yet to locate, I don’t know, ‘bound zero?’” Gray nodded then, suddenly pale, as if it was to be expected. Christy continued, “That was the first thing Emlen put me on when he brought me in to his “crisis” division, finding those bounds—he knew exactly what to look for. To track them with all the Library’s resources. I think the Black was just a trial of his *Narrative* dispersal.”

Gray appeared sickened. She could guess what he wanted to know, so asked him the lead question herself:

“But was that really what Emlen would have wanted? Turning reading into a drug, getting people to value just the bounds themselves?”

“Of course it is,” he replied, “Emlen’s got everything he wanted. People really ‘love’ their bounds now.”

And it gives *Emlen* the power to circulate whatever he will.

They continued the walk. Christy knew where they were heading, now, but didn’t let that on to Gray. Why spook him?

She said, “Then I heard about you. I’ve been working with new connections for

Emlen, he's already in contact with dissidents and Authors... with breakaway Houses; I ran in to some old friends of yours: Adam and Manoj at the Cat."

"Really?" He quirked his head at that.

"Really. They jumped on the new market! They've had free range to get on producing and distributing to the underground. They knew a lot about you, 'Gray.' You've gained quite a reputation."

He blushed. Though she let him wait it out, until he admitted, "I've been writing. Cards of them, written over old pieces of bond, re-written, intrinsic to the time and place it's created. I realised that's what I liked about the bounds all along: you have to admit that they *have* a history. The cards show my writing as it is throughout time, like 'the heat-glow in a piece of old ceramic.' The fixed artistic decisions made between two old prints, that produces a kind of 'literary thermo luminescence.'" He stopped. He took a breath.

Christy spoke into the break. "A palimpsest. You just quoted yourself, didn't you? 'There is no palimpsest in the long scroll of the screen.'" *Or in the one, "true" bound?* He agreed, pleased at her recollection. "Show me how you do it?" she asked.

And he stopped them in the street. He gestured at the building behind her and she realised they'd already made it. Christy turned her head and laughed. They crossed the street, entering through one of Bank's window-less store spaces, ducking into an arcade.

"A 'scrapbookers'?" she asked. More than just pretending to be incredulous. Of course she had known, but it was still such a brazen thought.

Gray just laughed. She looked sideways at him as they walked through. She supposed that it did make sense: workshops buying-up surplus—and misused—Arts&Crafts, to strip them, on-selling whole pages, slices of bond, or chunks of binding as spare parts back to the Houses themselves. A low profession; made worse by the snatchers who prayed upon them to dissect the secret bindings of artisan texts.

Inside it was a long, low room of desks, before which scores of Indigenous Brits sorted pieces of recyc'd bounds.

“It’s the best place for me to find context for my work. No one here cares what I’m going to do with the bond, as long as I pay.” *No, they wouldn’t*, scrapbookers were notorious for being chop shops of jacked bounds. “As long as I pay the going rate, I can browse their bins as much as I like; in fact, they keep selected titles aside for me. Over here?” She followed him. Still wondering at Gray, who had changed so much. Looking at this man, with his decisive movements, so in his element; who was so different to the Graham of her Collective, it was almost migraine inducing. Considering him now, Christy realised, *He could have been a Librarian! —If he weren’t so interested in writing himself*. She admitted. Perhaps a little bitterly.

“Christy. Look.” He dropped his bare hands into an off-cuts tub of *Actor / Celebratory Historicals* “There are page after page of the greats here, ready to be written over, giving my own work context. Building upon another’s writing.” She smiled at his enthusiasm, though she didn’t know where it would end up taking him. She had seen his “lamp post commentaries,” collages of his own print, literally written over the almost bleached sources he referenced.

“Show me what you do?” she asked again.

He sat and patted the bench beside him that lay in front of the tub of bond scraps.

“You know what got me into this mess in the first place? Wanting to ‘own’ my own ideas, to fix my voice in place? That turned out to be a mess, didn’t it? Sure it did. Writing, hell, *Authoring* has always been a conversation—Writer to reader—just now there might be more voices than once there was. Wreading has only made it a bit more one-sided, more solipstic, all writing and never reading, I guess...” he shook his head, “I put out a story now, as I write it. The cards scattered like they were my footprints. The trail of prints readers can follow, while I tell them my story. As it changes; as I experience it myself. The trail of prints telling my story.”

“You’re writing fiction now?”

“No!” he laughed. He had a sheet of bond down on the bench between them, Christy should have been wary of the unlicensed scrap—but the truth was, she figured that they all must be infected by now.

She watched as Gray splashed bleach over his page, wiping it away almost immediately and then putting it aside. Adding it to a small pile of prepared sheets which she'd not seen before. Then he took one that was dry and with it in front of him, leant in close with a pen, making strokes on it with the concentration of an insane crossword puzzler. Christy held in her sigh and scooted across to watch him over his shoulder.

Gray was sketching just a few letters on each line, marking over the faint tracing of the text left of the original. Not just letters, no... Gray was finding words, even whole phrases... building a new text from shadows of the old. Reiterating the original by making his own new text. Christy had seen his posts, cut-up pieces—still quite recognisable for their sources.

“I was so worried about my work being lost, that I didn't consider I could be erased, too. Then I saw the truth of it, that Writers were just as fragile as their texts. So instead of fearing being interpreted, I'm going to live on in the influences. Doesn't actually matter whether it's by feeder or by bound, it's the story between—between forms, readers and Writers—that's what's important.”

He looked away and dropped his bare hand into a tub of bond strips. “I'm writing it out in my own Apocrypha. Books woven into history. Through this whole 'thing,' what I realised is that Writers can just disappear. Readers have to see that a book is only history, not a platonic ideal. The fact that it can be wrong, that they can add to it—and not only start again and again, that's writing. It's fallibility is what makes it real, the dynamic of writing is what now creates a narrative of myself. The story of me comes through in bound, or feeder, whatever tells it. However we can.”

Gray seemed so proud.

She sat back from him. “It'll only get worse—everything. In fact, I think we've all been exposed to the *Narrative* by now. Funny, the Metatext is failing as everyone just *reads* and doesn't write—but you, you've always thought of yourself as an Writer, it should be affecting you differently, as *Inspiration* always does.”

“Is that why I'm doing this?” he laughed. And carefully took a pinch of white sand, or chalk, from another side tub, sprinkling, blotting his work.

“That’s not all, Graham, the grassroots infection here, in London, I’ve been tracking it back to you.” She swallowed. “I knew you were here. I’ve been reading your posts... Emlen must have dosed you with *Narrative*, right at the start.”

Gray shook his head. “He wanted you to find me, to watch over me? Is that what he told you? I don’t think so, instead, let me show you what he wanted you to find.” He stood and held his hand out for Christy to take. “Come, I have something for you.”

She stood, but said, “No—I don’t know,” she laughed, “What do you have for me?”

Gray led her to the back of the store, to a small toilet—through it; she followed him, crammed into the space as he shut the door, before then cheekily pushing aside a dummy wall. Into a small hidden room. Just a nook of shelving.

Christy looked at the only object inside. “Your bound?” How had he found a copy again?

“Not this time.” Gray picked it up, flipping it open to the title page. “This isn’t what I wanted—I didn’t know, not enough—but please keep reading, and perhaps you’ll finally understand for the both of us.”

She could only smile in recognition—at her own failure as an Agent, when Gray handed her *Bound Zero* itself. She recognised Neilson's work; so... she’d been chasing the *Narrative* all along.